Colonial Citizens of a Modern Empire: War, Illiteracy, and Physical Education in Puerto Rico, 1917-1930

Solsiree del Moral
Pennsylvania State University, Department of History
108 Weaver Bldg, University Park, PA 16802, U.S.A.
sxd46@psu.edu

Abstract
The year 1917 marked a critical moment in the relationship between the United States and its Puerto Rican colony. It was the year the U.S. Congress approved the Jones Act, which further consolidated the island’s colonial relationship to the empire. Through the Jones Act, U.S. Congressmen granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship. In turn, Puerto Rican men were asked to fulfill the obligations of their new colonial citizenship and join the U.S. military. The Porto Rican Regiment provided 18,000 colonial military recruits to guard the Panama Canal during the war. How did historical actors make sense of this new colonial citizenship? How did they interpret, debate, and adapt to the newly consolidated colonial status? This essay examines how local teachers and educators defined colonial citizenship. Puerto Rican teachers struggled to promote a citizenship-building project that cultivated student commitment to the patria (the island), while acknowledging the colonial relationship to the United States. In the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s, teachers debated military participation in World War I and the rights and obligations of U.S. citizenship. At the core, these debates were informed by anxieties over broader changes in constructions of gender. In the 1920s, Puerto Rico women aggressively and persistently challenged traditional gender norms. Working-class women joined the labor force in ever larger numbers and led labor strikes. Bourgeois women became teachers, nurses, and social workers. Both groups were committed suffragists. The historiography on citizenship and gender in the 1920s has focused on women’s emerging role in public spaces and their demands for just labor rights and the franchise. In this article, I propose we look at teachers, as intermediate actors in the colonial hierarchy, and examine their anxieties over changing gender norms. They debated men’s capacity to serve in the U.S. military and promoted modern physical education for the regeneration of boys and girls in the service of their patria. Debates among teachers in the 1920s sought to define the new category of colonial citizenship. As they did so, they helped liberalize some gender norms, while ultimately reinforcing patriarchy.

Keywords
Puerto Rico, education, gender, citizenship, empire, World War I
In 1917 the U.S. Congress approved legislation for Puerto Rico and other colonial territories that embodied the practices of “imperial formations.” The 1917 legislation was an example of how the United States as a modern empire “blurred genres of rule and partial sovereignties” as it “created new subjects … under uncertain domains of jurisdiction and ad hoc exemptions from the law on the basis of race and cultural differences” (Stoler, McGranahan & Perdue 2007:8). World War I reminded U.S. legislators of the geopolitical value of Puerto Rico to the United States in the Caribbean. That year, the U.S. Congress approved legislation between March and May that pulled the island and Puerto Rican men into the First World War. It also generated debates on the island about citizenship, gender, and education. In this essay, I examine these debates through the example of literacy and physical education campaigns.

In March 1917 the U.S. Congress approved the Jones Act, which replaced the 1900 Foraker Act as the island’s colonial constitution. The Jones Act did not fundamentally alter the colonial terms of the Puerto Rico-U.S. relationship as established by the Foraker Act. Although the former provided some reforms, it reinforced Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated colonial territory of the United States. In addition, in a controversial decision, the Jones Act granted U.S. citizenship to all persons born on the island. Puerto Ricans were now U.S. citizens, but with restrictions. For example, although U.S. citizens, the Jones Act denied Puerto Ricans residing on the island the right to vote in American presidential elections (Scarano 2008). The new citizenship granted in 1917, therefore, was a second-class or colonial form of citizenship.

In April 1917 the U.S. Congress declared war against Germany, and the country entered World War I. In May, Congress approved a new Selective Service Law requiring obligatory military service of all men aged 21 to 30. Citizenship was not a requirement for service in the U.S. military. Historically, colonial subjects and immigrants served. In 1917, however, the meaning of citizenship and the framework of empire and colonialism changed. Now, Puerto Rican men, as U.S. citizens, were obligated to register for military service according to the Selective Service Law (Paralitici 1998). Puerto Rican men, declared citizens of the United States, yet residing on

---

1 Unincorporated territories were not set on the path of incorporation as states (Ayala & Bernabe 2007; Thompson 2002).
an unincorporated territory, were called to serve. Military service was now an obligation of second-class citizenship. That year Puerto Rican men were recruited into the newly founded colonial military regiment, the “Porto Rico Regiment,” and deployed to guard the Panama Canal for the duration of the war (Villahermosa 2009). The 1917 colonial legislation and the conscription of Puerto Rican men generated great debate on the island about colonialism, U.S. citizenship, and masculinity. Teachers and colonial schools were at the center of the debate. In early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, citizenship-building was the responsibility of teachers and schools.

Education, Empire, and Citizenship

A key practice of American imperialism in Puerto Rico was the founding of colonial schools (Negrón de Montilla 1998). At the turn of the century, U.S. travelers and politicians compared Puerto Ricans to other colonial subjects in the “imperial archipelago” and concluded that Puerto Ricans were relatively friendly, welcoming, and eager to learn from the Americans. U.S. colonial officials imagined Puerto Ricans, unlike revolutionary Cubans and Filipinos, held potential for “improvement” (Thompson 2010). They proposed that Puerto Ricans might reap the benefits of American paternalism—in the form of schools and hospitals.

From 1898 to 1900, U.S. colonial officials traveled to Puerto Rico, assessed and disbanded the existing Spanish colonial schools, and with the collaboration of local pro-American elites, established a new colonial school system. In the first ten years, the Department of Education went through various changes in leadership. U.S. and Puerto Rican school administrators reformed school laws, founded teaching institutes, trained teachers, built or rented classrooms, and recruited children (Osuna 1949). U.S. educators imagined that the highly centralized colonial Department of Education could produce a curriculum that might generate support for American

---


control over the island. With the collaboration of local teachers, students could be converted from colonial subjects into “tropical Yankees,” or supporters of U.S. colonialism (Navarro 2002). After 1917, however, this goal became more explicit. The Jones Act created U.S. citizens, not tropical Yankees. In 1917 Puerto Rico’s commissioner of education, Paul G. Miller, charged Puerto Rican teachers with the task of Americanizing the new U.S. citizens. These were now “American schools” (Miller 1917, 1918, 1919).

What did it mean to Americanize U.S. citizens in an unincorporated colonial territory? How were Puerto Rican teachers, who were informed by various political ideologies but employed by a colonial school system, going to Americanize Puerto Rican students? The biggest obstacle to the imagined Americanization of students turned out to be the teachers themselves. In the first decade, commissioners of education experimented with multiple recruitment and training schemes. They brought U.S. teachers to the island. Many, however, were poorly trained, spoke no Spanish, and did not last long on the job. In turn, Puerto Rican teachers were sent to American institutions, such as the Columbia University Teachers’ College, to receive training from U.S. educators through intensive courses. The goal was to Americanize as many teachers as possible, to train them in American methods of teaching and pedagogy, hoping they could in turn serve as models for other Puerto Rican teachers. Commissioners, however, grew frustrated. The scale of the experiments was too small for Puerto Rico (Osuna 1949). The Puerto Rican context was unique.

U.S. commissioners looked to other colonial and mainland examples for solutions. U.S. educators took lessons from the long history of Americanization in Hawaiian schools, the boarding school practices for Native Americans, and the industrial and vocational training schools for African Americans (Adams 1995; Lindsey 1995; Navarro 2002). These were all models in Americanizing racial “others” on the mainland and the empire. However, Puerto Rico posed different challenges. It was a densely populated island. While small numbers of Puerto Rican students were sent to attend both Native American boarding schools and African American vocational institutes in the United States, the model was not practical. Parents and students demanded access to schools in their town centers and rural areas. During the early colonial encounter, commissioners found they could not import enough U.S. teachers and that U.S. schools could not board enough Puerto Rican students. Instead, U.S. officials founded a co-educational, secular, and public school system on the island (Osuna 1949).
U.S. educators also realized they depended on the collaboration of Puerto Rican educators. They were forced to rehire the existing generation of teachers that they had decertified upon their arrival. After passing English-language tests, many of the late-nineteenth-century teachers became local leaders, as principals of schools. In addition, the expanding number of classrooms and the demand from children to attend school required the recruitment of a new generation of teachers. Many high school graduates in the first decade of the twentieth century attended the island’s teaching college, the University of Puerto Rico, where they acquired certification to teach. The commissioner of education, in his centralized capacity, certified new teachers to serve in the Department of Education and assigned them to local schools. The number of teachers grew from 1,623 in 1910, 3,220 in 1920, and 4,451 in 1930. They attended to 522 classrooms in 1910, 1,422 in 1920, and 3,273 in 1930. The number of children attending schools also grew from 95,342 in 1910, 176,617 in 1920, and 221,189 in 1930 (Osuna 1949:628).

The growing number of teachers quickly organized into a professional union. In 1911, groups of regional teachers came together and founded the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (AMPR), the Puerto Rican Teachers’ Association. The association became the institution that allowed these two generations of teachers (the elders from the turn of the century and the new teachers of the 1910s and 1920s) to negotiate with the powerful commissioner of education. Teachers brought concerns about their salaries, appointments, tenure, school conditions, and curriculum to the annual teachers’ convention. They discussed and debated. At the conclusion of the conference, AMPR leaders compiled a list of demands that they then brought before the commissioner of education and the Puerto Rican legislature. Through the AMPR, teachers of various generations, regions, and political affiliations, presented their professional demands before the colonial government in a united voice.4

The speeches, lectures, pamphlets, essays, and articles teachers penned in the early twentieth century, however, went beyond professional concerns

---

4 AMPR Archives, Libro de actas, 1910-1915, Libro #1, and Libro de actas, Asambleas anuales, 1916 al 1925, Libro #4. See also AMPR documents and individual teacher writings published in the Puerto Rico School Review (PRSR) between 1917 and 1930. A note on archival materials: all archival sources cited in this article are located in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Series Oficina del Gobernador or at the private archives of the AMPR, both located in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
about salaries, appointments, and tenure. Their writings documented how schools and education were at the heart of communities. Both locally and island-wide, teachers engaged in debates with community leaders, politicians, and intellectuals about the central role of schools in the future of Puerto Rico. And, in the tradition of late-nineteenth-century liberal thought on the island, teachers promoted visions of regeneration, progress, and modernity. Teachers decried the current state of the island. Reflecting on their practices and experiences in urban and rural schools, in the language of neo-Lamarckian eugenics, they described their encounters with a people who were allegedly isolated, illiterate, and traditional. They lamented the lack of awareness about modern hygiene and sanitation practices among rural poor and urban workers. Teachers proposed ways they could rebuild “the home” and redefine relationships between mother and father and wife and husband. They imagined that they could teach the jíbaro (peasant) to farm more effectively and the jíbara to keep house more “scientifically.” Finally, they claimed the right to intervene in children’s health through the teaching of hygiene, sanitation, and physical education (Arán 1925; Sarriera 1921; Sellés Solá 1921b; Urrutia 1921). Teachers framed this neo-Lamarckian vision of regeneration through education as a practice in service to the nation (Stepan 1991). The nation of Puerto Rico was not yet founded. However, teachers, as employees of a colonial school system, wrote as if they were preparing the children—creating citizens—for the future nation of Puerto Rico (González Ginorio 1920).

This Puerto Rican teachers’ project, which coalesced around citizenship-building visions, came through forcefully in their writings. The documents teachers produced, nevertheless, also suggested there were divisions and conflicts within the teaching profession. The older generation of teachers was of an intermediate class. Many were children of the socially descending coffee elite who were displaced with the re-orientation of the island

---

5 Teacher Lorenza Brunet del Valle, for example, articulated specific concerns about hygiene and homemaking in rural homes (Brunet del Valle 1918 and Brunet 1919, 1920).

6 José González Ginorio, educator and president of the AMPR, in particular, theorized about the relationship between home and school (González Ginorio 1917a, 1917b, 1918).

7 The policies that teachers supported at the annual conference were collected in the Libro de Actas and published annually in the PRSR. For example, see Rivera Ufret 1917 and Sellés Solá 1921a, 1923.
economy in the interest of U.S. sugar corporations after 1898. Older teachers represented property-holding families of regional prominence. It was this older generation of teachers who became the elected leadership of the AMPR. In the early twentieth century, older, traditional, patriarchal men represented the AMPR. This leadership and their views on gender, in particular, were at times in conflict with the younger generation of teachers. Those who first became teachers in the 1910s and 1920s also came from an intermediate social class. However, they were younger, trained in a U.S. school system, reformist, and more “radical.” They welcomed, for example, new and modern pedagogy. They rejected the traditional athletics in favor of a more inclusive, popular, co-educational physical education curriculum. Supporting modern physical education, for example, implied challenging traditional gender roles.

The AMPR, therefore, represented a united voice before colonial authorities, such as the commissioner and the legislature. Teachers, however, represented multiple political and social visions. As civil servants, nevertheless, they were mindful they could not openly express a criticism of U.S. colonialism or of Puerto Ricans' subjugation before the American empire. To do so would mean to be blacklisted, fired, and decertified. There were many examples in the 1910s when the commissioner of education rallied against high school and university students who challenged U.S. colonialism (Negrón de Montilla 1998). Colonial schools were both a politically charged and censored space. Nevertheless, through the promotion of their citizenship-building project and vision for the regeneration of their students, teachers challenged Americanization policies.

In 1917, when the Jones Act declared Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens, when Puerto Rico’s unincorporated status was consolidated, and when Puerto Rican men were conscripted into the U.S. military, schools and education took center stage. The military recruitment of Puerto Rican men made public a shocking reality. The majority of the men who registered for military service could not pass the military’s entrance exam. Most did not meet literacy and physical requirements (Hickle 1918; Torrregrosa Rivera 1938). The question arose: what was the purpose of U.S. colonial schools in Puerto Rico, if after seventeen years they could not produce a majority of literate and healthy men? What had they been teaching after all? This concern about the priorities of the U.S. colonial Department of Education suggested a broader question. What kind of men should colonial schools
create in Puerto Rico? And what was the responsibility of these men to the island and the empire?

The debates that emerged regarding masculinity, war, and citizenship were emblematic of colonial reformist ideologies in a politically repressive space (schools). The majority of teachers and educators did not openly reject conscription in the service of the empire. However, the rejection rates became an opportunity for teachers to negotiate for a more “modern” and “progressive” physical education curriculum that could be more inclusive and expansive to the benefit of all students. The crisis created an opportunity for teachers, who could not openly challenge U.S. colonialism, to promote a reformed curriculum in the service of their students and with the intention to cultivate the regeneration of future citizens.

**Gender and Citizenship**

For teachers in the 1920s, the politics of colonial reform were not simply academic exercises. These debates were at the core of their daily practice in the classroom. The challenge of defining a new colonial citizenship took center stage. Creating citizens became their responsibility. The permanency of Puerto Rico’s colonial status within the American empire was more clearly established through the Jones Act and the acquisition of U.S. citizenship. How did this political framework shape colonial schools? What were the rights and responsibilities of this new form of second-class or colonial citizenship? How did it affect the teachers’ broader citizenship-building agenda? In the tradition of autonomist politics, teachers found ways to define the new colonial citizenship, while also affirming a Puerto Rican identity within the parameters of U.S. colonialism.

In school debates of the 1920s, one of the principal methods for defining the promises and limits of the new colonial citizenship was through the lens of gender and patriarchy. Teachers articulated their citizenship-building project, which was grounded on the relationship between home, school, and patria and the practice of modern education, by defining gender roles and modern patriarchy in Puerto Rico. For teachers, the 1920s debates took

---

8 Teachers could not protest publicly, but individual men did reject conscription (Paralitici 1998).
at least three forms. First, teachers who were liberal reformers found ways to embrace what they saw as progressive, liberal, and regenerative in the redefined colonial relationship, the new colonial citizenship, and modern education. Teachers imagined that the young men who joined the Porto Rican Regiment and the young girls who were introduced to co-ed physical education classes were engaging in regenerative opportunities granted by a liberal and modern colonial government. Second, educators who were radical reformers found greater promise than ever in the regeneration of Puerto Rican families through the process of Americanization. In the tradition of pro-annexationist ideology, Commissioner Juan B. Huyke, for example, believed that the modern and scientific practices that undergirded Americanization ideology in the 1920s promised to instruct working-class mothers in healthy and eugenic mothering practices. In effect, Americanization could help liberate the contemporary child from allegedly “backward” mothering practices. Third, conservative educators and parents rejected some of the gender reforms promoted by liberal reformers and tried to re-impose what they considered more traditional norms. Liberal teachers faced a conservative backlash. The conservative critique not only targeted the modern education of young girls, it also criticized a new generation of female teachers.

In the 1920s, education debates reflected a broader anxiety over changing gender norms. The island’s emerging women’s social movement challenged the assumed authority of the older generation of male teachers and the dominance of patriarchy within the teaching profession. Working-class women unapologetically claimed their rights in public spaces as labor organizers and suffragists. Middle-class women swelled professional ranks. In addition to teaching, they emerged as leaders in social work and nursing (Barceló Miller 1997). As women organized and claimed public spaces, educators debated what they feared to be newly emerging gender crises, as seen in the examples of men’s masculinity during World War I and physical education instruction for boys and girls. These debates allowed for a broadening of definitions of appropriate gender roles in the 1920s. Nevertheless, the debates highlighted the limits of new gender roles and served to reinforce patriarchy within the profession.

---

The 1920s debates over education and schools, therefore, highlight the competing visions of colonial citizenship and gender. They also allow us to examine how teachers, as intermediate actors in the colonial hierarchy, contributed to the definition of colonial citizenship for all Puerto Ricans. This was a definition that, in the tradition of autonomist ideology in the early twentieth century, affirmed the uniqueness, difference, and promise of a Puerto Rican identity within the limits and boundaries of U.S. colonialism. The contribution of this article, therefore, is to show how teachers—as historical actors other than elite intellectuals and politicians—also contributed to early twentieth-century debates about the new colonial citizenship granted in 1917. And to note that at the core of the definition of the new colonial citizen and the modern school lay the contested definitions of gender, families, and homes. Through the debates over the citizenship-building project of schools in 1920s Puerto Rico, from the location of the colony, as they questioned traditional gender norms, teachers were making their contribution to the practice of “imperial formations” (Stoler, McGranahan & Perdue 2007).

Illiteracy Rates, Masculinity, and War

The illiteracy rate was at the core of debates over the right to exercise the franchise, capacity for U.S. citizenship, and potential for self-government. In 1899, Puerto Rico’s illiteracy rate was 80 percent (Osuna 1949). For U.S. colonial officials, a high illiteracy rate helped legitimize the founding of colonialism. Both U.S. colonial officials and elite Puerto Rican politicians questioned the capacity of illiterates to fully participate in government. When universal male suffrage was reinstated in 1904, Puerto Rican elites feared losing control over the colonial government to the interests of the working class. The pro-annexation Republican Party proposed that once the illiteracy rate was reduced to 29 percent, they would move forward with a petition for incorporation into the U.S. federation of states. The liberal Unión Party characterized the rate of illiteracy as a “social evil.” Although bourgeois female suffragists in the 1920s demanded the right to vote for their gender, they were divided over whether to support this right for illiterate women (Barceló Miller 1997). Despite the rapid growth in the number of colonial schools and the new access it granted girls and the working
class more broadly in the early 1900s and 1910s, literacy was a privilege of the elite. Adult men and women were the least served by colonial schools (Bobonis & Toro 2007).

The debates over literacy as a measure of capacity for citizenship, as a stepping stone toward self-government, and as a measure of the progress, modernity, and civilization of Puerto Rico took center stage between 1917 and 1919. When newspapers reported that the majority of men who volunteered to join the Porto Rican Regiment during World War I were rejected because they were illiterate, a crisis ensued (Coxhead 1918; Hickle 1918). The 1910 census reported that the island's illiteracy rate had dropped to 65 percent, but in 1917 a larger percentage of rural adult men who had registered for the draft had been rejected. If the majority of adult men were, in fact, illiterate and failed to meet that basic requirement of citizenship, teachers asked, how could they fulfill the duties of the newly granted U.S. citizenship? Literacy and military service were duties, not privileges of citizenship. What did these military rejection rates imply about literacy in Puerto Rico? Were illiteracy rates higher than had been reported? Was public school attendance a privilege for children which excluded adults? Was there a regional division? In 1910, 79 percent of Puerto Ricans lived in rural areas. Had the colonial Department of Education, by founding most schools in urban centers, failed to address the demands for public instruction where it was most urgent—the countryside?

The illiteracy rates among men who volunteered to join the Porto Rican Regiment brought to light the limited reach of public schools in 1917. When Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship, colonial officials, teachers, and parents demanded urgent attention to teaching literacy. The military rejections generated a crisis about adult men's capacity for citizenship. Working through this crisis became a practice in defining colonial citizenship in the late 1910s.

Before the war, the successes and failures of the colonial Department of Education in Puerto Rico were measured first and foremost by illiteracy rates (García Casanovas 1919; Hickle 1918; Padín 1917a). Colonial administrators proposed the argument that literacy through English-language instruction had to be intensified in order to create U.S. citizens out of colonial subjects. Assistant Commissioner of Education Cary Hickle proudly declared in 1917, now that the Jones Act had been approved, “the chief business of the school is to produce... good citizens” (Hickle 1918:7). U.S. colonial
officials saw the path to literacy and to fulfilling requirements of citizenship through English-language instruction. For them, English-language and literacy were at the core of definitions of U.S. citizenship (Negrón de Montilla 1998). While the education scholarship has condemned commissioners for the political motivations behind English-language policies, in fact, in the 1910s and 1920s commissioners were careful to balance English and Spanish-language instruction. The intention was to promote English, while “conserving” Spanish (Hickle 1919). This policy assumed Spanish would remain important on the island, but subordinate to English. Nevertheless, the teaching of English to a Spanish-speaking people in an unincorporated colonial territory was also a practice in further consolidating the colonial relationship between the island and the United States and reinforcing the assumed superiority of Americans over Puerto Ricans.

Improving literacy rates, however, held different meanings within Puerto Rican debates. First, illiteracy rates allowed teachers to critique what they perceived to be the failure of the colonial U.S. Department of Education to satisfy the popular demands of the pueblo for education. The colonial government had not been able to expand quickly enough. They needed to build more schools and train and hire more teachers to educate more children! Newspaper articles declared, “To acquire success what is needed is money, money, and money. Schools, schools, and more schools.”

Attaining literacy and access to education was not an imperial imposition. Instead, parents and students demanded it. Sadly, the U.S. colonial Department of Education, many complained, nineteen years after the United States invaded and occupied the island, had failed to meet that demand. This was a critique of the capacity of the colonial government to fulfill the declared promises of “benevolent imperialism.”

Second, low literacy rates allowed others to condemn what they understood to be U.S. colonial administrators’ misguided imperial mission in Puerto Rico. The emphasis on using English as the language of instruction, as part of the grander Americanization vision, was wasting valuable time! Most children only attended school for three years. This was too brief a time to waste teaching English, when they could be teaching literacy in Spanish, in addition to more practical topics such as home economics,

---

11 This was a common argument, for example, see García Casanovas 1919.
hygiene, and agriculture. U.S. colonial officials’ unrealistic prioritization of English-language instruction had failed to teach the fundamentals, particularly literacy. Therefore, English-language instruction undermined Puerto Rican students’ path toward citizenship (Sellés Solá 1931). These criticisms of the priorities of the colonial Department of Education, nevertheless, were also a practice in reinforcing Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States. By advocating the intensification and expansion of schools, teachers and parents were also contributing to the consolidation of a colonial school project, for further incorporation of Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens into the American empire.

Nevertheless, local calls for improved literacy were not always tied to U.S. colonialism. Some educators and parents demanded the eradication of the rate of illiteracy in the name of the progress and modernity of Puerto Rico’s “civilization.” José C. Díaz, Comerío’s school board president, argued that it was “time that we fight to erase that stigma [illiteracy rate] that belittles us to civilized nations” (Díaz 1919:53). For the good of the patria, teachers demanded the intense cultivation of culture and dignity, which began with the acquisition of literacy. Díaz (1919:54) concluded: “We would be sinning for lacking patriotism, if we did not fight to extirpate the evil that harms us and that presents us to the world with such a high percentage of illiterates like a country that lacks true and ample culture.” Carlos Rivera Ufret, secretary of the AMPR, rivaled Díaz’s patriotism, when he called on teachers and other literate persons to “demonstrate to the illiterate the necessity of becoming instructed not only for their own wellbeing, but to contribute by giving a more honorable seal and pride to our race and our beloved land” (Rivera Ufret 1919:10). Teachers wanted to generate pride in representations of Puerto Rican men abroad, to the imagined audience of modern and scientific educators in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. This was a reflection of their vision of self (the magisterio) as modern and cosmopolitan, mediated through the shame and embarrassment over the “degeneracy” of working-class adult illiterates.

Three months after granting Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship in 1917, the United States entered the Great War. The U.S. military called on men to

---

12 This was a long-standing criticism proposed by AMPR leadership. It became a mainstream position once it was also supported by the 1925 Columbia University study (International Institute of Teachers’ College 1926).
join the U.S. Army through the segregated Porto Rican Regiment and to “do their bit” (Miller 1918). Military service was a crucible. Puerto Rican men, categorized as colonial subjects for the past eighteen years, had just been granted a restricted form of U.S. citizenship and were called to demonstrate their commitment to the empire by serving in the military during war time. This was an important moment for the intensification of autonomist ideology on the island, for choosing to participate in military service in a colonial regiment was a practice in reinforcing the island’s subordinate relationship to the United States. It was, at the same time, an opportunity to assert the capacity of Puerto Rican men for citizenship. A total of 236,000 men participated in the process when they registered for the World War I draft. Out of these, 18,000 men were elected and served. “More than one-half of the teaching force [entered] into the service of the United States as either officers or soldiers” (Miller 1918).

A crisis in the definitions of masculinity and citizenship ensued when the public learned that 75 percent of the volunteers had been rejected from Camp Las Casas. They had failed to meet the U.S. Army’s literacy requirements and physical standards. The rejection of so many adult men, particularly rural men, for failing to meet physical requirements generated a new category in public debates about the definition of colonial citizenship—“physical illiteracy” (Arán 1926; Torregrosa n.d.). The military recruits were doubly illiterate when they failed to meet literacy and physical requirements. The spectacle of physical illiterates had two immediate consequences—a debate over the most effective ways to reconstruct the Puerto Rican “man” and a popular movement in support of literacy campaigns. The concern about overcoming the “physical illiteracy” of adult men, in particular, also reflected the gendered construction of the category of “citizen” in the 1910s and 1920s.

The concept of the “physical illiteracy” of the male military volunteer touched on existing anxieties in Puerto Rican debates over the islands’ “culture,” levels of degeneracy, and limits of modernity. Teachers saw in the military rejection rates an opportunity to advance their agenda for

---

13 The consequence was the reorganization and emphasis on physical education in public schools for both boys and girls (Arán 1926, Gil 1920, Santoni 1920, Torregrosa Rivera 1938); E. Santiago Márquez, En bien de la instrucción, El mundo, November 8, 1919, p. 2; and Paul G. Miller, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Series Oficina del Gobernador, Box 778, General file 3024, Circular Letter no. 32, December 1, 1920.
citizenship-building, by focusing on penetrating rural areas as intensely as possible. The physical illiterate represented everything teachers were trying to overcome through modern education. They encapsulated the worst effects of “traditionalism” within rural communities and the Spanish colonial heritage of neglect of the countryside. The “ignorant masses” were slowing down the island’s ability to catapult into modernity and fully embrace progress. Military rejection rates confirmed how the physical state of Puerto Rican men was “degenerate.” Here was proof that the tropical climate and the isolation of the highlands forced the degeneration of the mythic founding “Latin race.”

The concept of “physical illiteracy,” in fact, complemented teachers’ already existing assumptions about rural communities. The isolation of rural society, from the urban teacher’s perspective, generated little value for literacy, schooling, and modern forms of parenting and homemaking (Concepción 1918; Pérez Mercado 1920). Genaro Concepción (1918) offered a sympathetic yet paternalistic reflection on the jíbaros’ condition:

He lives today as his ancestors did many years ago; as innocent as a child, with complete lack of knowledge of events that occur outside of his island, stuck to the land that he irrigates with sweat, and like the pariah of the Middle Ages, he has not an inch where to dig his tomb; . . . he lives in a miserable bohío that looks more like a big birds nest rather than human housing; his children barefoot, hungry, and ragged. And the reward for a long suffering and laborious life? When he reaches old age he finds he must go to the towns to beg for public charity so as not to die of hunger and destitution.

Jíbaros, sadly, teachers’ argued, were a contemporary representation of the past with little to contribute to the modern nation-building and citizenship-building efforts of Puerto Rico’s liberal progressives.

Thankfully, educators like Concepción argued, the “physical illiteracy” of jíbaros was the result of their environment—the highlands, the home, the farm—and was therefore subject to change and regeneration. The war, U.S. citizenship, and military service could be the catalyst for that change. The war, therefore, was a great opportunity for jíbaro men to evolve. Through military training, jíbaros could be exposed to methods, practices, and experiences they would not have otherwise experienced.

In the Puerto Rican countryside an unexpected transformation is taking place that is completely altering the destiny of our jíbaros. What once was tranquility and apathy, today is activity and concerted effort; what once was submission and weakness, is
now patriotism and courageousness... It seems that a new Messiah has spoken in the ear of our jíbaro the magic words surge et ambula (rise and move forward) and to the enchantment of that solemn order he shakes off the traditionalism that weighs on his conscience, like an immense lead slab, and presents himself to America as a new man capable of all sacrifices and renunciations. What magic wand has caused this resurrection? War. (Concepción 1918:46)

Those not accepted into military service, however, were also pulled out of the assumed lull of rural areas, Concepción reported, as they were being asked to contribute to the intensified food production efforts during the war. Finally, once the war was over, military recruits could return to the island and serve as models of labor and leadership to those jíbaros left behind (Concepción 1918:46). For Concepción this was a great opportunity for regeneration, the regeneration of local men who contributed military service to the American empire.

Teachers imagined that reversing the illiteracy rate of rural adults, however, required intense effort and support from the entire community. They called on the legislature, politicians, and even U.S. colonial officials to support their initiatives by funding literacy campaigns (Vincenty 1919a, 1919b). Rural illiterate adult men, after all, educators reminded legislators, had the right to vote in insular elections. Literacy was at the core of the right to vote, of the rights of citizenship, of the immediate direction of local politics.

Teachers offered a series of proposals for urgently and systematically attacking the “social evil” of illiteracy and demanded that legislators and the colonial Department of Education support them. More rural schools should be founded and more teachers trained and hired. But in addition, new legislation must allow for compulsory school attendance for children, harsh penalties for parents who kept children out of schools, and mandatory night school attendance for adult illiterates. Luis García Casanova, winning author of the 1918 AMPR annual literary contest, argued that the legislature should fund a “school police force” responsible for conducting a census of illiterate adult men aged 17 to 50. The men could, then, be forced to attend night school. The school police could also enforce compulsory school attendance for children during the day and persecute those parents who took children out of school to labor in the fields or factories.14

---

14 García Casanovas 1919:12. In the early twentieth century, teachers often turned to legislators to demand compulsory attendance laws and the persecution of parents who failed to
In this early 1917 literacy campaign, teachers designated rural parents and landowners as equally culpable for rates of illiteracy in rural areas. While they called on the colonial state to legislate mandatory school attendance for children and adults, and they imagined rural landowners were hindering literacy by forcing children to work in the fields instead of allowing them to attend school, teachers did not offer a broader critique of the island's colonial economy—agricultural production for export, the expansion of light manufacturing, and the corresponding processes of the proletarianization and loss of land for small farmers (Dietz 1986). Teachers were more critical of the parents that pulled children out of schools than they were of the rural elite who hired them. When they did offer a critique of the rural elite, they called for reform of specific child labor practices rather than colonialism more broadly. The exception to this conservative critique of colonial economics was José Padín. During his brief appointment as assistant commissioner of education in 1917, he offered a critique of U.S. colonialism, the granting of U.S. citizenship, and the labor practices that reinforced colonialism and reproduced dire living conditions for the working class. However, this was likely the type of explicit critique that school teachers would have been censured for sharing publicly.

Teachers were not alone in their mission. Island legislators also proposed a series of projects to support literacy campaigns in 1919. They were guided by the fear that the 1920 census might document little progress in literacy for adult men, particularly now that they had acquired U.S. citizenship.

send children to school. For example, see Miller 1919, Suarez 1919, and San Juan, Junta Escolar, 1904:18-20. Their request, however, was matched by colonial administrators' interests in school attendance. Colonial officials presented the issue of legislating and enforcing mandatory attendance as the best way to protect children from abuse by illegal forms of labor in factories and the fields. See “Child Labor and School Attendance,” Puerto Rico School Review 4, November 1919, pp. 8-9; “Ley regulando el trabajo de mujeres y niños, y protegiéndolos contra ocupaciones peligrosas,” Puerto Rico School Review 4, November 1919, pp. 62-65; and Paul G. Miller, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Series Oficina del Gobernador, Box 686, File Enero 31/1917, Document no. 1500, January 31, 1917.

15 Julio B. Ortiz, “Sobre el analfabetismo,” El mundo, October 29, 1919, p. 8; Suárez 1919.
16 Padín’s 1917 critique foreshadowed the anti-colonial pro-nativist economic reform policies he advocated when he became Puerto Rico’s Commissioner of Education in 1930. Padín 1917b.
17 “83 escuelas nocturnas se establecerán en la Isla,” El mundo, September 17, 1919, p. 2 and Rivera Ufret 1919.
And reducing literacy was a concern that the colonial reformist leadership of the Partido Unión, Partido Republicano, and Partido Socialista shared in the late 1910s. Fear of the illiteracy rate of adult men in the age of universal male suffrage demanded forming difficult alliances and coalitions in the late 1910s and 1920s (Bernabe 1996). Three legislators proposed a bill to found a Universidad Popular, or People’s University, which could contribute to the specific goal of teaching literacy, while also offering conferences and lectures by local political leaders and educators on contemporary matters.18 Other legislative proposals requested $20,000 to be distributed as cash prizes for teachers and students who taught literacy in their private time.19 A call was made to fund a Liga de Instrucción para Analfabetos to combat the “army of illiterates...crucifying our land with its ignorance.”20 These proposals resonated with teachers’ initiatives. Educators such as Carlos Rivera Ufret called on eighth-grade graduates, “as proof of civic responsibility and...interest in our people...and gratitude to our patria,” to take the initiative to establish night schools and teach adults literacy. “It is worth us making the sacrifice for the good of our poor class and for the pride of our country!” (Rivera Ufret 1919).

The initiatives proposed by teachers, legislators, and concerned community members imagined the regeneration of the large number of “physical illiterates” that came to light during the recruitment efforts of World War I. In their proposals, historical actors engaged in two interconnected conversations. As they proposed ways to support literacy campaigns “to teach them [jíbaros] how to live as men and as citizens,” they were at the same time further inscribing themselves and their initiatives in support of the colonial form of U.S. citizenship they had just been granted.21 Achieving literacy and regenerating the physicality of rural men were at the heart of local intentions to create healthier and more “cultured” male citizens. Teachers identified this to be a minimal requirement of citizenship, as a marker of progress, culture, and civility among modern nations. The teachers’

19 “Por la cultura de Puerto Rico,” El mundo, March 15, 1919, p. 3.
campaign, however, lacked a critique of the colonial limitations of the franchise and on the colonial and subordinate relationship that military volunteers reproduced through military service. The 1917-19 literacy debates, nevertheless, allowed teachers to promote the regeneration of adult men, for the good of Puerto Rico, within the limits of U.S. colonialism.

Gender and Physical Education

The spectacle of the “physical illiteracy” of Puerto Rican men during the World War I registration campaign generated long-term consequences for the colonial school curriculum. In addition to the more immediate demands for literacy campaigns, it led to a transformation in the definition and practice of physical education (Arán 1925). Organized athletics and sports, especially baseball, had been part of high school sports culture, particularly in larger urban towns. However, as awareness emerged in the 1920s of the “presence of so many physically abnormal children” and the fear of a “cataclysm of physical degeneration” of students’ bodies, teachers began to advocate the expansion of physical education for all students (Sellés Solá 1921b). The transition to a “modern” version of physical education was imagined to be a requirement for establishing a “foundation for citizenship.” Modern physical education, with its intention to create healthy citizens, was meant to reach beyond select athletes to the general student body and to be equally accessible to both boys and girls. While educators agreed about the value of creating “perfect citizens” in Puerto Rico, the co-education aspect raised some reservations (Urrutia 1921:16). Should young girls be allowed to take physical education classes, where they might be wearing athletic clothing, alongside boys, in the outdoors, under the sun? The debate over how much access to grant girls became a conversation about the limits of modern school practices in colonial schools. In the 1920s, as educators debated the transition from athletics to physical education for the “good of the patria” and with the intention to create citizens, they were also engaging in the process of defining the limits of the “modern girl” and “proper motherhood.”

The physical education movement was not embraced with the same urgency and enthusiasm as the literacy campaign of the late 1910s. The educators who advocated more aggressively for physical education, who
employed a neo-Lamarckian eugenic discourse, and who closely linked physical health and forming “perfect citizens,” were particularly represented within the leadership of the 1920s teaching profession. In the 1920s, a new generation of men, after working as teachers and attaining higher education and training in the 1910s, moved into administrative and leadership positions within the colonial Department of Education. They became principals of municipal high schools, supervisors of school districts, and directors of departments. Many had been long-term members or leaders of the AMPR in the late 1910s. It was this group of educators—Gerardo Sellés Solá, Pedro Gil, Julio Fiol Negrón, and Carlos V. Urrutia—who began to replace U.S. educators in the Department of Education. The department became increasingly controlled by local educators, although under the leadership of Juan B. Huyke, a commissioner who was adamantly pro-Americanization and pro-English. The core elite of Puerto Rican educators assumed leadership of the physical education campaign in the 1920s. As they did so, they often considered the average young teacher and parents as constituencies they had to educate about the value of physical education and the urgency of this project for Puerto Rico.

The transition from athletics to physical education after the war was, first, about definitions of citizenship. Yes, “physical illiterates” had raised the alarm about the alleged “degeneracy” in the majority of the adult population. More importantly, however, they generated closer scrutiny of the health and hygiene of students’ bodies. In 1920, Pedro Gil, the principal and athletic director of Yauco High School appealed for a commitment to physical education on behalf of all teachers. “We witnessed half of our young men rejected during the first recruitment due to physical incapacity. [It] renders them incapable of carrying out military duties and denies them the first obligation of all citizens—defense of country. Are we, educators, to stand by and remain undaunted and immutable before such a terrible reality? . . . Are we pretending to create a citizenry [pretendemos levantar un pueblo] out of this anemic and scrawny raza, one that is prepared to stand proudly among civilized nations?” (Gil 1920:12). The “weakness” of “our raza,” represented in students’ bodies, had to be overcome in the interest of creating healthy and robust citizens for the patria. The health of the body was the foundation for the development of moral and intellectual abilities. Gil (1920:18) concluded:
We have the moral obligation to mold the future generation: . . . we must not forget for an instant physical education, the foundation on which rests the rules of order that will make our men strong so they may assume the fight in defense of the holy principles of UNIVERSAL DEMOCRACY.22

Students’ bodies not only represented the physical “weakness of the raza.” They were also emblematic of social conditions that the middle-class teaching profession feared and defined as working-class practices. These social behaviors, in addition to the physical bodies, were targeted for rehabilitation in the 1920s. Physical education courses, like the literacy campaigns, were intended as a cure to the imagined debilitating and corruptive examples children might have been exposed to in both their homes and public streets. Newspapers reported increases in juvenile delinquency, lamented the spectacle of street children, and questioned children’s participation in games that incorporated gambling (dice, dominoes, horseracing, cock-fighting, and even baseball).23 The physical and moral instruction students received in physical education courses, teachers argued, would help students overcome those negative environmental influences, which could, in neo-Lamarckian logic, otherwise prove corruptive for future generations.

Prewar athletic traditions, as a result, were characterized as decadente, generating decay. They were traditional, elitist, and individualistic. The more physically fit students were chosen to participate in high school and semi-professional teams. They became the “privileged” elite few who received attention and resources from coaches. Municipal teams met once a year to compete in the Insular Annual Interscholastic Athletic meet (Faberllé 1925). It was there, Gil (1920:14-15) argued, that you could best identify the stark differences between the few elite athletes and the majority of students: “While we see teams of strong, robust, children full of life and happiness, who have been mentored into the sport . . . we forget about the physically weak, scrawny, diseased youth.” In the stands, the children’s “quiet weeping” fell on silent ears as they witnessed the “wheel of progress” leaving them in the past.

---

22 Emphasis in original.
23 This was a common concern for teachers (Sellés Solá 1921a, 1921b; Antonio G. Martínez, “El problema de los niños,” El mundo, December 3, 1919, p. 9; Rafael Martínez Marrero, “Cuestiones pedagógicas. Después de las 4 p.m.,” El mundo, August 13, 1919, p. 10; and Félix Matos Bernier, “Los brotes de la vida,” El mundo, January 13, 1921, p. 6).
In addition, traditional “recreation” was feared to be organized around gambling. Horseracing and cockfighting, in particular, were defined as corrupting and immoral for young children (Sellés Solá 1921b:34). Elite teachers identified these activities as part of a colonial Spanish heritage that was failing to contribute to the contemporary push for the regeneration of the citizenry. Physical education, as a counterpoint to the traditional Spanish popular practices, was part of a modern health and hygiene campaign. It was meant to be healthy, progressive, inclusive, and popular, to generate a sense of community. Advocating for modern physical education, therefore, required that teachers negotiate Spanish and U.S. heritages, influences, and visions.

U.S. educators who came to the island to evaluate the state of athletics, physical education, and leisure activities in the 1920s identified local traditional games as the worst examples of Spanish elitism and gambling. They juxtaposed these Spanish practices with the best American ones, defined as democratic, inclusive, modern, and progressive. Helen V. Bary’s assessment of “child welfare” on the island celebrated that schools were transitioning away from Spanish games. Children were benefiting from the “transition from the old tradition of Spanish aristocracy to that of American democracy—of universal participation and responsibility to community life” (Bary 1923:67). U.S. educators’ definitions of appropriate physical education curricula were exported from Columbia University to U.S. colonies. The physical education course books and the visiting faculty from the United States traveled and shared experiences across Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The regeneration of colonial students through physical education was part of a broader 1920s American imperial project.

In Puerto Rico, meanwhile, teachers offered more nuanced characterizations of physical education. Yes, it was considered foundational for creating modern citizens. And while the citizens they were creating were of a colonial type, teachers were explicit that they were advocating the creation of well-rounded citizens for the good of their patria and their country, which in the 1920s they identified to be Puerto Rico, not the United States. Ismael Ramos, a physical education teacher from Mayagüez, reported, “One of my life dreams had always been to have the opportunity of offering the youth of my country, this little Island, the means of acquiring a well-developed body which may serve as a basis for future generations, for every learned person knows that the mind cannot attain its fullest development in all its
activities unless it is within a well-developed body” (Ramos 1926:39). The potential for witnessing progress and achieving modernity, as seen through the healthy regeneration of student bodies, therefore, was not a simple exercise of teachers embracing Americanization practices. Instead, it was a deliberate negotiation of the aspects of modern education theory which they identified as important for the regeneration of Puerto Rico’s students, for the good of the country. This was an example of autonomist ideology in practice, as teachers chose to advocate physical education within colonial schools as a modern practice that was particularly relevant to local conditions.

How did teachers intend to implement physical education and its broader citizenship-building goals? The primary goal was to make it accessible to the majority of the students. First, they advocated the training and hiring of instructors specially trained in physical education as well as making it a mandatory course. Baseball and track-and-field coaches, educators feared, were invested in the success of their semi-professional teams at the expense of teaching greater lessons, for example, sportsmanship. And, as the director of the new Physical Education Department explained, they feared that many *maestras inexpertas*, inexperienced female teachers, simply were lacking training and preparation to effectively teach physical education (Gil 1920:13).

As a result of the elite teachers’ campaign for the expansion of physical education, and the support and collaboration of the colonial Department of Education, a new generation of physical education instructors were trained, hired, and deployed throughout the public schools. The Department of Education hired ten physical education instructors in the 1920s, only one was female.24 Those who were recruited and trained as physical education instructors epitomized the ideal modern man—athlete, veteran, teacher. The Faberllé brothers were key examples. Before the war, they were famous athletes. Ciqui and Fabito Faberllé were two of the four most well-known baseball players of the time, known as the *cuatro jinetes del beisbol* (the four leaders).25 During the war, they served in the Porto Rican Regiment and were members of the regiment’s baseball team. After the war, they were

---

24 Physical education instruction and teacher training was founded in the 1920s. It would develop more fully into a profession that meant to address the needs of the majority of the population in the late 1930s.  
25 The other two *jinetes* were Cosme Beitía Sálamo and Gacho Torres.
war, illiteracy, and physical education in puerto rico, 1917-1930

recruited into the physical education training program at the University of Puerto Rico. They represented the best example of intellectual, moral, and physical development.26 This idealized modern man was imagined capable of leading the “physical illiterate” out of the past into the present through the teaching of physical education.

Advocacy of mandatory physical education, however, was more important than the physical education classes themselves. It was about applying neo-Lamarckian eugenic ideology in support of the sanitation and hygiene of public spaces and the home. Teachers called for the founding of public parks where students could play “healthy” games under the supervision of teachers (Sellés Solá 1921c:44-46). The curriculum should also provide for organized leisure activities. The modern methods of physical education, which included supervised outdoor play, were meant to replace the unsupervised time children spent in public spaces, which Sellés Solá and others feared was exposing children to “social vices” (gambling, drinking, smoking, and prostitution) and potentially leading to the degeneration of future generations of the raza. As Sellés Solá (1921b:35) exhorted:

Let us raise strong generations, proud of this condition and inclined to conserve it, giving them a pure and moral life, and an adequate mental cultivation. Let us form the perfect home, the happy home. Our patria will thus become great thanks to the health, purity, intelligence, and hard work of its sons.

While literacy campaigns generated popular support, parents proved less than enthusiastic about the modern practice of physical education. Elite teachers expected parents to contribute to the physical education move-

26 Beitía Sálamo attended Ponce High School, where he excelled in track and field and baseball. One of the “four leaders” of baseball in the 1920s, he founded the professional baseball team known as “Puerto Rico Sports.” Beitía Sálamo earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Puerto Rico, a master’s degree in physical education from Columbia University, and a law degree from the University of Puerto Rico. He was the first professor of physical education at the University of Puerto Rico. In 1929, he founded the Liga Atlética Intercolegial. Beitía Sálamo was also a first lieutenant in the Regimiento 65 de Infantería and a member of the National Guard of Puerto Rico. Fortier Méndez also attended Ponce High School, where he was both a student and the coach of the school’s baseball team. Fortier Méndez served in World War I as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He retired from the military as an infantry captain. Fortier Méndez was one of the first professors of physical education in 1920s, assigned to the Guayama High School (Tomasini 1992:18-22, 92-94).
ment in multiple ways. The propertied classes should donate plots of land to be developed into public parks or athletic fields. The less wealthy parents, at the very least, should support teachers’ efforts to expose their children to modern methods of sports and recreation. However, elite teachers were hard pressed to understand why all parents were not abundantly enthusiastic about physical education. Some even lacked empathy for those parents who asked for their children to be excused from physical education classes because their participation was wearing down the children’s clothing and shoes. Carlos Urrutia (1921:17), a leading member of the AMPR appointed to the newly created position of Superintendent of Physical Education in 1921, considered this a small sacrifice: “Who cares if they break a pair of shoes? That is insignificant. The health and happiness of the family make up for such small loses.” In his enthusiasm for physical education, Urrutia failed to empathize with the economic challenges working-class parents faced in the 1920s. They, in fact, struggled to provide clothing for their children so they could attend school.

In particular, educators were dismissive of those they identified as “conservative parents,” characterized as “incredulous” and from a “past era,” who opposed the modernization and diversification of school curriculum. These parents were particularly concerned about girls’ access to physical education. When parents wrote notes to teachers requesting their girls be exempted from physical education classes, teachers rumored it was due to their “traditional” and “conservative” thinking about girls and women’s roles (Urrutia 1921:17). Parents were concerned about co-ed physical education classes in high schools. They were not interested in having their daughters running around public plazas and playgrounds under the glaring sun. For some educators, it was these conservative parents’ traditional characterization of women’s role in the community and family which had to be overcome. While Puerto Rican educators experienced “some difficulties” in their campaign to expand physical education, they felt particularly challenged by the “old customs and traditions of the people, who expect for their girls, not the sturdy, hardy type of Anglo-Saxon womanhood, but rather a medieval type of girl, light-skinned, sweet, delicate, brittle, romantic, and highly sensitive” (Fiol Negrón 1929:44).

Elite teachers identified this conflict and resistance as parental misunderstandings about traditional versus modern definitions of “proper womanhood.” Teachers countered conservative parents by deploying the 1920s ideology of “social feminism” (Barceló Miller 1997). Julio Fiol Negrón, the
new supervisor of physical education in 1928, argued in support of girls’ right to physical education. Girls “have a right to the sports and amusements of the world just as they have a share in the tears and toils of life.” On the one hand, girls had to develop their health and strength in order to succeed in their future occupations. More women than ever were employed outside the home. As “a rival of man in the world’s work . . . the occasions for her to use physical strength have multiplied, whether she be in a room facing fifty pupils, or typewriting, selling, curing, giving legal advice, or laboring in field or factory.” Such labor required physical strength and “vigor.” On the other, he reproduced the biological differences between men and women. Girls also had the right to develop healthy bodies to prepare them to fulfill their “earthly mission in this world, bearing and rearing children.” Elite educators such as Fiol Negrón defined women’s appropriate roles in public and private spaces within the modern patriarchy of early twentieth-century Puerto Rico and argued that they too were “entitled to the privileges of a complete education” (Fiol Negrón 1929:44). Girls’ rights to physical education, their right to overcome conservative parents’ apprehension about modern girls’ practices in colonial schools, were rationalized within the parameters of local patriarchy. The visions for the modern girl were neither a U.S. imposition nor revolutionary. They were, nevertheless, social feminist visions about the new requirements for a modern and liberal Puerto Rico.

In the 1920s, the directors of the newly founded Department of Physical Education oversaw its expansion through the hiring of specialized teachers and the broadening of the curriculum. A special section was created in the education journal Puerto Rico School Review to promote the activities and goals of physical education in the classroom. The intention of the articles and the images published in the section was to educate teachers on the value of physical education and to suggest the best methods through which to promote it. The images published in the PRSR, with the intention to promote physical education for girls, suggest how educators struggled to balance appropriate practices that supported their definition of the new modern schoolgirl. Some of the images were typical of those that might have represented U.S. physical education classes in the 1920s—high-school-aged girls wearing knee-length shorts or skirts and socks pulled up to the knees, running track, stretching in organized rows, or playing basketball. Other images, however, represented island-specific interpretations of acceptable female domesticity promoted through schools.
For example, in the November 1926 edition, teacher Generosa Fernández wrote an article introducing the U.S.-based organization founded in 1912 known as the Girls Scouts. In the article, Fernández defined the intention of the organization to be threefold: to introduce girls to natural and healthy outdoor activities that help develop body and mind; to provide them the skills to become responsible homemakers; and to serve the community. The goals of the Girls Scouts fit perfectly within the social feminist vision that women could be educated to become more efficient and modern in their home making and civic duties. However, the image that accompanied Fernández’s article highlighted a more traditional interpretation of appropriate activities for young girls as they were promoted through physical education coursework in 1920s Puerto Rico. It was a photograph of the young women who were members of the “Future Mothers’ League” in the Juncos public schools. The Girls Scouts mission was progressive as it imagined women’s civic duties in the community and the practice of physical activity in the outdoors. The acceptable local version of women’s clubs, however, emphasized training young girls in the required skills for their primary responsibility as mothers (Fernández 1926:43).

A second popular image in the Physical Education section of the PRSR presented children engaged in folk dance. Elizabeth Lutes, an instructor of “Natural Dancing,” promoted teaching dance to children as a form of physical and intellectual expression. “Dancing does not mean only that one is able to move in time to music. It means a finer understanding of emotional expression, a free, uninhibited use of the intellect.” Dancing was an “intellectual activity worthy of prominent place in physical education” (Lutes 1927:39-41). It was also acceptable within local schools, for it complemented local views that women were more delicate, refined, and artistic than men. Folk dancing, in particular, was a method that helped local girls develop their feminine, rather than feminist, characteristics. The folk dances taught in schools in the 1920s originated from Europe, rather than the island or the Caribbean region. The photograph that accompanied Lutes’s article on natural dance captured the work of a first-grade teacher from Carolina, Esperanza Cuín. Cuín’s class posed for a photograph that exhibited their mastery over a French minuet.

By the late 1920s, elite teachers proudly reported that, after their campaigns in local communities, parents were fortunately beginning to “awaken.” They were no longer, through their conservative and traditional
War, Illiteracy, and Physical Education in Puerto Rico, 1917-1930

biases, inhibiting the progress of colonial schools. Young girls, as well as boys, would reap the benefits of modern physical education with the support of the enlightened parents. “Parents and teachers are today in agreement that the school cannot generate character, that is, cannot fulfill the essential goal of education, as long as we are not instilling in the child the habits of play and physical development, disciplining his will, molding good hearts and perfect citizens” (Urrutia 1921:17).

Building from the momentum for “regeneration” that came from the World War I rejection rates, teachers linked physical education, modern practices, and citizenship-building. Teachers imagined that fulfilling the requirements of colonial citizenship required a gendered reconstruction of boys and girls through the schools. Overcoming physical illiteracy, while initially focused on adult men’s alleged degenerate physical bodies and illiteracy rates, also meant redefining women’s roles in schools and modern society. If women were to carry out their complementary roles, as wife-mother-educator, then teachers also had to address female physical illiteracy. Regenerating girls’ health, exposing them to modern methods of physical education, leisure, and recreation, above and beyond the reservations of conservative parents, was one way teachers could generate modern colonial citizens in the 1920s.

Conclusion

The late 1910s and 1920s provided historical moments of crises and contradictions. The highly contested definition of colonial citizenship emerged and created a space where gender ideologies and practices required further clarification. Generational differences highlighted the boundaries of the social constructions of gender, patriarchy, and citizenship. Negotiating the new definition of colonial citizenship within the new imperial framework required balancing definitions of tradition and modernity. Teachers elected aspects of the Spanish and Puerto Rican heritages and practices to retain, if they were not considered too “backward” and “traditional.” They redefined modern practices as progressive Puerto Rican initiatives, rather than as American impositions. This process of negotiating the definition of colonial citizenship, the intention of schools, and the reconstruction of the gender roles, was carefully worked out within the limits of the colonial
framework established by Jones Act. Through these debates and practices, teachers as intermediate actors, contributed to the process of reproducing and consolidating “imperial formations.”

References


Solsiree del Moral


San Juan, Junta Escolar, 1904. Informe de la Junta Escolar de San Juan, 1903-1904. San Juan: Tipografía “El País.”


