U.S. colonialism has shaped education in Puerto Rico since 1898, the year the United States went to war against Spain in Cuba and the Philippines. In the Age of Empire, the United States had strategic reasons for seeking overseas territories in the Caribbean and Pacific. Spain was a declining empire that had progressively lost its overseas colonies throughout the nineteenth century. The Caribbean region, the site of a future isthmian canal, was key to U.S. goals of economic and military expansion. The 1898 war, notwithstanding objections from anti-imperialists, provided a timely opportunity for U.S. expansionists in government and industry.

As part of its war against the Spanish in Cuba, the United States invaded the island of Puerto Rico on July 25, 1898. The war ended on December 10, 1898, when both nations signed the Treaty of Paris. The agreement transferred ownership of Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific to the United States. The United States thus emerged as an overseas empire holding sovereignty over the islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Guam.

Although the war ended in 1898, Puerto Ricans suffered under U.S. military occupation until 1900. The island’s political leaders were denied the right to participate in the 1898 Peace Treaty deliberations and in the 1900 U.S. Congressional debates and approval of the Foraker Act. With this act, the U.S.
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Congress created the first civil government for Puerto Rico. Other important congressional acts would follow, each one reinforcing a colonial relationship. In 1917 the U.S. Congress passed the Jones Act, granting U.S. citizenship to island-born residents of Puerto Rico. From the beginning, this was a type of second-class citizenship. The U.S. government had the right to conscript Puerto Ricans into the U.S. military and deploy them to fight in American wars overseas, yet the same residents did not have the right to elect their island’s governor until 1948. Even today, Puerto Ricans residing on the island are U.S. citizens who cannot vote for the president of the United States.

The ideology of Americanization guided U.S. colonial policies in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico (1898–1930). Americanization called for the economic, political, and military integration of Puerto Rico into the U.S. federal system. In the case of public education, the goal was to teach young Puerto Rican school boys and girls to love, support, and advocate for U.S. colonialism on the island and to imagine themselves as members of the United States. Americanization as an educational ideology was not new to the Progressive Era. It had been applied by U.S. educators in different ways to recent European immigrants, as well as African Americans and Native Americans. It had also been practiced by U.S. missionaries and educators in the Hawaiian school system for almost a full century before it was implemented in Puerto Rico. In none of these examples did Americanization imply the formation of full-fledged U.S. citizens who enjoyed equal protection under the law. Jim Crow governed U.S. race relations and franchise was restricted, in practice if not by law, to white males. The Americanization of brown and black Puerto Rican schoolchildren meant teaching them to aspire to a version of liberalism and citizenship that, in practice, did not exist. Puerto Ricans who studied in U.S. boarding schools, colleges, and universities experienced the United States as a nation that maintained a rigid hierarchy of racial and gender exclusion. A second-class version of citizenship for Puerto Ricans was considered the norm.

One of the first challenges U.S. colonial educators faced in Americanizing Puerto Rican schools was their need for a suitable teaching force. It was local teachers who would be responsible for teaching English, U.S. history, and support for U.S. colonialism. Initially, commissioners of education worked with the Puerto Rican legislature to transform the island’s teaching force through two strategies. First, U.S. teachers were invited to come to Puerto Rico, in the tradition of U.S. missionaries, to lead the Americanization campaign. Second, a small number of scholarships were created to allow gifted Puerto Rican students to study in the United States at Native American and African American industrial schools. A smaller number of local graduates studied in U.S. colleges and universities or attended summer teaching institutes on the mainland. These early efforts to create a pro-American teaching force proved inadequate.

A large number of teachers were required to staff the growing number of rural and urban schools. The number of government-owned classrooms grew from 522 in 1910 to 3,273 by 1930. The schools served almost 100,000 students in 1910, more than doubling to 221,189 by 1930. The Department of Education employed 1,623 teachers in 1910, and the number of Puerto Rican teachers in the classroom reached 4,451 by 1930. In the end, the majority of teachers recruited by the Department of Education were local educators who had been teachers at the time of U.S. arrival, as well as a new generation of 1910s and 1920s graduates from local colonial schools. Local Puerto Rican teachers represented a middle class or intermediate group in the island’s class hierarchy. They may not have been wealthy, but they had cultural capital. They were literate, ran local schools, and emerged as community leaders.

They were also Spanish speakers. Public school teachers were required to pass an English-language test to be eligible to work in the colonial schools. But fluency in English did not mean that they would teach in the English language. Most school children, especially rural children, in the early twentieth century only attended school for a couple of years. They might or might not become literate before they returned to work in workshops and the fields. English was of little value to them, and teachers’ commitment to teaching literacy in the Spanish language became one of the great challenges to the goals of Americanization. In a Spanish-speaking country, where the majority
of teachers were native Spanish speakers, teaching English fluency, or trying to transform Spanish speakers into fluent English speakers, was a losing battle. This U.S. vision of creating English-speaking supporters of U.S. colonialism, known as “tropical Yankees,” saw very limited success.16

There were several other reasons Americanization could not succeed if it depended on local teachers to transmit its values. Many Puerto Rican teachers had their own vision for their students, schools, communities, and island, and it did not prioritize Americanization. As the public school system expanded, teachers united to create an island-wide union and professional organization, the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (AMPR). First, the teachers’ union leadership, influenced by neo-Lamarckian eugenic understandings, promoted the “regeneration” of their students.17 Regenerating the Puerto Rican people (the *raza*) meant promoting healthy and sanitary practices in the home and schools. The teaching leadership viewed modern education as a tool in their quest to help families and the island progress and modernize. The goal of regenerating the student body, and by extension the family and home, focused on the needs of the island and its people. Teachers wanted to rebuild the Puerto Rican people and cultivate future citizens of the island *patria*, children who would be proud of their culture, heritage, and history. This goal clashed with Americanization, for the AMPR leadership was not preparing brown and black students for a subordinate place in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Finally, although teachers were public employees who were denied the right to express or advocate for any political position in the classroom, their writings and speeches demonstrate that they understood Puerto Rico’s colonial status to be temporary. They saw no reason to promote U.S. citizenship. Instead, they advocated for the regeneration of their students and the island, not for a cultural assimilation or political annexation to the United States.18 Puerto Rican teachers, therefore, posed a significant challenge to the U.S. colonial administrators’ Americanization goals. They would not be the ones to transform students into English speakers and U.S. patriots. Rather, they helped students gain literacy in Spanish and learn Puerto Rican history. Although there were no doubt teachers who were sympathetic to the project of Americanization and English-only instruction, apparently they kept their opinions to themselves. The minutes of the AMPR meetings and publications record no instances of support for Americanization.19

While there were some of the obvious differences in the goals of Puerto Rican teachers and colonial administrators, they shared others.20 Both called for more public schools and better education and training for public school teachers. Both identified the classroom as one of the most important locations where children could learn, evolve, progress, and modernize. And both shared the hope that the new generation of children educated in public schools would take that knowledge into their homes and communities and generate a vast transformation throughout the island. In many ways, teachers found ways to overlap with colonial administrators in their shared goals for teaching literacy, health, hygiene, sanitation, physical education, and home economics.21

The Americanization campaigns in Puerto Rico came to an end in the 1930s. The Great Depression shifted the goals of U.S. colonial officials away from Americanization to economic reconstruction. Since the 1930s, each generation of local teachers has been forced to negotiate their goals with those of the island’s commissioner of education. There are several lessons we can learn from the experience of the early-twentieth-century education debates on the island. One of the most important is that the role of local teachers is critical. While commissioners and other high-ranking administrators have education goals that reflect the interests of the ruling political party, those goals cannot be put into practice without the collaboration of local teachers. Teachers, therefore, must be included in deliberations from the very beginning. Their knowledge about local assets and goals must be at the heart of larger educational debates. In the early twentieth century, local teachers and US colonial administrators sometimes collaborated and at other times

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In addition, the AMPR held annual competitions that promoted the creation of Puerto Rican history texts for use in the classroom. These teachers did not surrender the responsibility of creating Puerto Rico-centric school texts to the U.S. colonial commissioners of education.
disagreed. During the first three decades of US colonial rule, U.S. educators were confident in their ability to set the agenda. Puerto Rican teachers, who advanced their own visions, taught them that schooling in Puerto Rico has always been a carefully negotiated process.

Today’s teachers carry this heritage into their contemporary struggle to maintain control over their classrooms, schools, and communities. In 2017 the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Roselló Nevares, appointed Julia Keleher secretary of education. Roselló is the leader of the New Progressive Party (PNP), which advocates for U.S. statehood or the radical integration of Puerto Rico into the U.S. federal system. Like the U.S. colonial commissioners of education that came before her, secretary Keleher has been rejected by teachers, who consider her an outsider who has little connection to or investment in the local school system. Her goals stand in sharp contrast to those of local educators. The Puerto Rico Teachers’ Association and the Teachers’ Federation of Puerto Rico have challenged Keleher’s enthusiasm for structural reform and privatization. Surviving a fiscal crisis and the deep trauma of Hurricane Maria, teachers, parents and students are fighting for their communities and against structural reform. Secretary Keleher can learn from the mistakes of U.S. colonial administrators before her, who tried to reform a school system without the consent of local educators. The Americanization goals of the early twentieth century were limited, divisive, and ineffective. If they are to avoid the mistakes of the past, U.S. colonial officials today must center teachers’ visions at the heart of the school project if they are to achieve effective reform.

ENDNOTES


18. Del Moral, *Negotiating Empire*.
19. “Libro de actas, 1910–1915, Libro #1” and “Libro de actas, Asambleas anuales, 1916 al 1925, Libro #4,” Private Archives of the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, San Juan; *La revista escolar de Puerto Rico/Porto Rico School Review (PRSR)*, 1919–1929. There was, nevertheless, at least one Puerto Rican administrator who supported Americanization. Juan B. Huyke is the only one that appears in the documentation. See Negrón de Montilla, *La americanización* and Del Moral, “Language and Empire.”
21. While teachers and administrators shared these larger ideas about the universal value of education, there was great disagreement in the details. For example, Puerto Rican and U.S. teachers worked together to create a home economics curriculum. In the end, Puerto Rican teachers rejected U.S. teachers’ inability to adapt the curriculum to local needs. The use of a modern kitchen and appliances is a case in point. Puerto Rican teachers complained this particular focus was a waste of time and misdirected. The that lack of electricity, indoor plumbing, and poverty meant many rural households, for example, found themselves excluded from this version of home economics. See writings by Lorenza Brunet del Valle. In addition to the debates between Puerto Rican and U.S. educators, in the 1920s there were emerging disagreements within the local teaching force due to generation and gender differences. See Del Moral, *Negotiating Empire*.