

Puerto Rico's Education System: The Language and Political Problem

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“The experiences of Alaska and Hawaii since statehood with cultural destruction has been indicative of the cultural loss Puerto Rico would eventual [sic] face if statehood for the island were chosen. Under the commonwealth status, there has been a gradual deterioration of the Spanish language among the Puerto Rican populace and a growing Americanization of the island.”¹-Justice Sonia Sotomayor (1976)

I. INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

It is nearly impossible to examine the issue of education in Puerto Rico without first revisiting the island's history and its problematic political status with the mainland United States. By the end of 1898 the Spanish-American War had finished and Spain had ceded the remainder of its overseas colonial empire to the United States.² Nonetheless, Puerto Rico is the only one of Spain's former possessions in the Americas to never gain its independence.³ Instead Puerto Rico has remained in the possession of the United States and the 1917 Jones Act granted

¹ “In College Thesis, Sotomayor Appeared to Support Puerto Rican Independence”
<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/05/26/in-college-thesis-sotomayor-appeared-to-support-puerto-rican-independence/>

² The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War, Introduction
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/intro.html>

³ The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War, The Changing of the Guard: Puerto Rico in 1898
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/bras.html>

United States citizenship to Puerto Ricans.⁴ In 1952 the island's official status was established as that of a commonwealth.⁵ Although 116 years have passed and multiple plebiscites have occurred on the issue of statehood, there is still much unhappiness expressed regarding the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.⁶ While the most common constitutional issue raised by the public seems to be that Puerto Ricans are unable to vote in presidential elections when residing on the island⁷, its current political status implies the possibility of several other constitutional violations.⁸

In this paper I shall discuss that although attempts have been made by the United States to implement English into the Puerto Rican education system, these efforts have failed largely due to cultural and economic barriers that are intertwined with its political status. Unless a new and successful method of teaching English is implemented in schools in Puerto Rico, the quality of education in Puerto Rico will continue to suffer, the earning potential of many will remain low, and the population on the island will remain mostly monolingual.

II. EDUCATION STRUCTURE

The structure of education in Puerto Rico has been undergoing transformation since the territory was acquired by the United States. When the

⁴ The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War, Jones Act
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/jonesact.html>

⁵ "Puerto Rico's Status Debate Continues As Island Marks 61 Years As A Commonwealth"
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/25/puerto-rico-status-debate_n_3651755.html

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Wickmann, Forest "John Oliver on the Other Americans Who Still Don't Have Full Voting Rights"
http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/03/09/john_oliver_on_us_territories_voting_rights_why_cannot_puerto_rico_american.html

relationship begun, education in Puerto Rico was still in a developmental stage. In fact, the Spanish had only began the enforcement of an educational decree some nineteen years earlier in 1880.⁹ The decree organize the public and private primary education systems and called for compulsory attendance for children from the ages of six and nine.¹⁰ While Spain made this effort, the lack of schools made it difficult for children in rural areas to attend.¹¹ The United States was now confronted with a new territory where “[a]t the end of Spanish rule... [b]etween 79 percent and 85 percent of the Island's total population was illiterate” and where “at that time there were 810,394 inhabitants, 268,639 of whom were children, but only 16.7 percent of the latter were in school.”¹²

Today, school attendance in Puerto Rico is mandatory from the ages of six to seventeen.¹³ When discussing the structure of the education system with Puerto Rican locals, one will immediately recognize that it was closely modeled after the mainland United States.¹⁴ This means that education is comprised of elementary, intermediate, and high schools.¹⁵ Additionally, due to its commonwealth status, Puerto Rico, like any other state, is part of the U.S. Department of Education’s mission to promote student achievement.¹⁶ However, Puerto Rico’s Department of Education and the Puerto Rican Education Council oversee and administer

⁹ Brief History of Education in Puerto Rico <http://enciclopediapr.org/ing/article.cfm?ref=06081401>

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ The Education System in Puerto Rico <http://www.studylands.com/guide/PR-education.htm>

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Frances Rodriguez, May 6, 2015

¹⁵ *Id.* supra note 13.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Overview and Mission Statement <http://www2.ed.gov/about/landing.jhtml?src=ft>

education on the island.¹⁷ The Department of Education is divided into different sections and offices¹⁸ whose functions are to supervise both primary and secondary public education. ¹⁹ On the other hand, the responsibility of the Puerto Rican Education Council is to oversee academic standards and to issue licenses to private educational institutions on the island.²⁰ As of 2013, there were 1,460 public schools and 764 private schools, and over 50 institutions of higher education.²¹ Moreover, the higher education system also closely resembles the United States model.²² There are universities that offer associate, bachelor's, and professional degrees. ²³ While overall schools in Puerto Rico follow the standard United States model, children in rural areas are exposed to pre-vocational education which includes training for a particular trade.²⁴ Historically, rural areas of Puerto Rico have been plagued with higher percentages of children living in poverty.²⁵ Thus, the ultimate purpose of such a form of education is to raise the standard of living by providing students in rural areas with a form of training that will enable them to work in a skilled job.²⁶

¹⁷ *Id.* supra note 13.

¹⁸ Departamento de Educación de Puerto Rico <http://www.de.gobierno.pr/conoce-al-de#1-subsecretaría-de-administración>

¹⁹ *Id.* supra note 13.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ An Overview of the Education System in Puerto Rico <http://www.puertorico.com/education/>

²⁵ See Adams, Bert, Handbook of World Families available at https://books.google.com/books?id=3FL_L_HGGFkC&pg=PA454&lpg=PA454&dq=poverty+in+rural+areas+puerto+rico&source=bl&ots=KBYS4vTyoU&sig=pPS7WBk5aDBIgfL3fMx4e6KB2Q&hl=en&sa=X&ei=6mJZVeHJD8i1yATC94PQCQ&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=poverty%20in%20rural%20areas%20puerto%20rico&f=false

²⁶ *Id.* supra note 24.

III. LANGUAGE LAWS AND THE PROBLEMS

The laws regarding the official language of Puerto Rico have changed throughout its relationship with the United States. During this time there have been seven different language policies in place for the public education system.²⁷

In 1902, the Official Languages Act, which was part of the Foraker Act, ordered that English be co-official with Spanish in government departments and offices.²⁸ Next, in 1917 the Jones Act declared English as the official language.²⁹ In 1934, Spanish was once again officially the language of instruction up to grade eight.³⁰ In 1946, a bill was passed by the Puerto Rican government making Spanish the official language of instruction.³¹ However, the bill was later vetoed by President Harry Truman.³²

When President Truman vetoed the bill which was passed by Puerto Rican government, he was confronted with much backlash.³³ The reason for this was because it was viewed as postponing a resolution that was formulated in order to address concerns that Puerto Ricans had about the language laws that had been implemented.³⁴ Opposition to the language policies the United States had executed

²⁷ See Rodriguez-Arroyo, Sandra *The Never Ending Story of Language Policy in Puerto Rico* (2013) available at

<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=tedefacpub>

²⁸ Puerto Rico's History <http://www.topuertorico.org/history5.shtml>

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² See Navaro-Rivera, The University of Puerto Rico. "Colonialism and the Language of Teaching and Learning" (Fall 1999) available at <http://www.lesley.edu/journal-pedagogy-pluralism-practice/pablo-navarro-rivera/colonialism-teaching-learning/>

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

was at an all-time high during the 1940's.³⁵ In fact, the residents of the island strongly resisted the language laws in political, cultural, legal and educational arenas.³⁶ This led people to manifest their opposition in several ways. Among these were stories written about teachers in Puerto Rico teaching entirely in Spanish unless they were being visited by a school supervisor.³⁷ Additionally, Professor Harry Bunker of the University of Puerto Rico claimed that there were members of the faculty at the university who would secretly teach in Spanish.³⁸ Other teacher's choses to defend the culture and language by lowering U.S. flags from classrooms and schools and replacing them with the Puerto Rican flag.³⁹ It was clear through a study conducted that with even with the legislative attempts, not only did English not become the primary language of instruction and comprehension, but learning overall was suffering.⁴⁰ Yet, if teachers were not instructing in English they could have been forced to resign.⁴¹

Furthermore, opposition to English as the language of instruction was present even among supporters of the United States presence.⁴² The Teachers Association of Puerto Rico argued that "the issue was not the coexistence of English and Spanish required by the new political status between the United States and Puerto Rico. The real issue, they insisted, was the effort to impose English as the

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* supra note 27.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.* supra note 32

vernacular of Puerto Ricans. The language used in the classroom should be determined by pedagogical reasons. Using a language not understood by both teachers and students they felt was detrimental to the educational process”⁴³ This is unsurprising because in general teachers often encounter many obstacles when teaching English as a second language.⁴⁴

Moreover, after the election of the first governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Munoz Marin, and the establishment of the Commonwealth, Spanish returned as the official language of instruction.⁴⁵ Since then, finding the place of English in the Puerto Rican education system continues to be revisited.⁴⁶ Another problem that has been discussed is how policies have been overly focused on the teaching of English, that now teaching Spanish properly has been neglected.⁴⁷

In 2012, now former Governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Fortuño developed a plan to once again put more of an emphasis on the teaching of English in public schools and to develop additional bilingual ones. His goal was to have all schools in Puerto Rico bilingual by 2022.⁴⁸ Fortuño cited “economic necessity, not politics” as his reason for this. It is not surprising then that as recent as April 2015, it was discovered that between 2011 and 2013 there were 218 Puerto Ricans granted disability status by Social Security Administration for their inability to speak

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ Seven Problems of Teaching English as a Second Language
<http://bravenewworld.in/2012/02/22/seven-problems-of-teaching-english-as-a-second-language/>

⁴⁵ *Id.* supra note 27.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

English.⁴⁹ The guidelines used stated a “claimant’s inability to communicate in English can lessen the relevance of work experience and education, potentially making it more likely the claimant will receive disability benefits.”⁵⁰ This is problematic because 95 percent of Puerto Rico’s residents over the age of 5 speak Spanish at home and 84 percent are not fluent in English.⁵¹ Consequently, college-educated individuals, such as nurses, might be considered unskilled if they do not speak English.⁵² This will likely have a negative economic impact since unskilled workers tend to have lower income earning potential.⁵³

IV. ADDRESSING MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OTHER ISSUES

In 2010, the literacy rate in Puerto Rico was estimated at 92 percent.⁵⁴ This is lower than the mainland United States, which has an estimated literacy rate of 99 percent.⁵⁵ That same year statistics in showed that only 60.0% of the population graduated with a high school degree or obtained some form of higher level of education, and that just 18.3% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.⁵⁶ These low numbers imply that there are perhaps more problems regarding education in Puerto Rico than language. Furthermore, even in the capital, San Juan, “conditions

⁴⁹ Hicks, Josh “Puerto Ricans who can’t speak English qualify as disabled for Social Security” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2015/04/10/puerto-ricans-who-cant-speak-english-qualify-as-disabled-for-social-security/>

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.* supra note 13.

⁵³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm

⁵⁴ The World Bank, Data

http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?order=wbapi_data_value_2010+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-first&sort=asc

⁵⁵ PBS, World Literacy Rates by Country

http://www.pbs.org/pov/biblioburro/photo_gallery_biblio_world_literacy_map.php#.VVm6SvlViko

⁵⁶ *Id.* supra note 13.

frequently resemble those of under-developed countries, with deeply rooted socioeconomic inequalities and incomplete access to basic services like sanitation, public health, and an adequate education that other American citizens take for granted.”⁵⁷ While at the end of 2013 there were 1,460 public schools and 764 private schools on the island,⁵⁸ not enough schools exist to provide all children with an equal quality of education.⁵⁹ The quality of education in public schools in Puerto Rico has been described in the media as “embarrassing.”⁶⁰ Millions of dollars have been invested in improving the education system on the island, but conditions are not changing.⁶¹

According to representative of the Unión Nacional de Estudiantes (the Nation Student Union), even when students do choose to go into higher education, “39 percent of university students in Puerto Rico had to abandon their studies. Of those who did graduate university, 30,000 left the country annually.”⁶² Again, since education is often correlated with salary, the exodus of Puerto Rico’s most educated individuals is potentially damaging to its economy. It is also unhelpful that

⁵⁷ Weeks, Daniel, “Second-Class Citizens: How D.C. and Puerto Rico Lose Out on Democracy” <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/second-class-citizens-how-dc-and-puerto-rico-lose-out-on-democracy/282888/>

⁵⁸ *Id.* supra note 13.

⁵⁹ *Id.* supra note 24.

⁶⁰ “Vergonzosa” la calidad de educación en las escuelas públicas <http://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/seguridad/nota/vergonzosalacalidaddeeducacionenlasescuelaspublicas-1860302/>

⁶¹ *Id.* supra note 16.

⁶² United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization Approves Text Supporting Puerto Rico’s ‘Inalienable Right to Self-Determination’ <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/gacol3269.doc.htm>

unemployment is double what it is on the national U.S. level.⁶³ The reality is that people are leaving and the population has declined by almost 300,000 since 2004.⁶⁴

Furthermore, in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) the right of a parent to direct the upbringing of their children was acknowledged.⁶⁵ While this case had to do with the state of Oregon mandating children to go to public schools, it should be considered when developing a reformed education system. The reason for this is because Puerto Rico's policy on language needs to not only be implemented in public schools to be successful, but also as a policy for private schools on the island. The extent to which parents should have a right to direct the upbringing of their children when it comes to them becoming bilingual in English and Spanish is then something that will need to be evaluated further.

V. CONCLUSION

The influence that Puerto Rico's political status will have on the implementation of any policy regarding education is undeniable. Puerto Rico being in a limbo between statehood and independence creates a hybrid culture. This political status has allowed for its school system to also fall in limbo which has led to over a century of failed attempts at improvement. The Americanization of Puerto Rico can be witnessed firsthand when visiting the island. It is seen in everything from restaurants and retail stores and in the dialect of the Spanish that is spoken.

⁶³ "NYC Shows Puerto Rico How to Stay Alive If U.S. Says 'Drop Dead'" <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-08/nyc-shows-puerto-rico-how-to-stay-alive-if-u-s-says-drop-dead>

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Pierce, Governor of Oregon, et al. v. Society of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

⁶⁶ The reality is that unless Puerto Rican schools are completely restructured, the quality of education in Puerto Rico will continue to suffer, the earning potential of many will remain low, and the population will remain overwhelmingly monolingual. The need to address Puerto Rico's limbo status has is seen by the United Nations taskforce that was created in order to "expedite a process that would allow the people of Puerto Rico to fully exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence, as well as take decisions, in a sovereign manner, to address their economic and social needs." To conclude, Puerto Rico no longer in the indeterminate state will allow the island to properly know what the next steps at restructuring its education system will be.

⁶⁶ Visit to Puerto Rico May 2015

