

**El Laberinto: The Impact of Colonialism on Puerto Rico's Education System and Social
Mobility**

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Introduction

Colonialism has created a blueprint of destruction and loss in Puerto Rico's education system. Investigating Puerto Rico's education system and its colonial past and present affirms what scholars, like Boricua Rocio Zambrana, assert; Puerto Rico remains a colony rather than a commonwealth of the United States. In the 2021 book *Colonial Debts*, Zambrana argues the implementation of U.S. policies created a predatory economic system by monetizing the island's subordination that only excels when the island is in a state of crisis. This predation survives in a neoliberal market where private control, specifically U.S. investment, is prioritized as a tool to deliver public services—education is no exception.

¹ A term for Puerto Rican, based on the Indigenous Taino Language.

Historically, Puerto Rico's education system has functioned to manipulate the fate of Boricuas by classifying them as second-class citizens on their land. A decade before officially colonizing Puerto Rico, education stakeholders from the U.S. conducted missions in Hawaii, the Philippines, and Indigenous communities in the 48 states to "civilize" people after colonizing them by forcing the English language on these communities (Amherst College 2018, 42). English became a tool for belonging to U.S. culture and suppressing Boricuan identity. If English was one of the most widely used languages, the language ceased to be a way to merely communicate and transformed into universal capital. After the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, Boricuas were socially perceived as second-class citizens and the education system imposed on them served to maintain this hierarchy for students; K-5th graders were tested on their ability to write and speak English. By speaking the language, Boricuas were expected to assimilate and live like U.S. citizens.

Assimilation would entail advocating for the protection and survival of Puerto Rico under U.S. law since the U.S. could offer socioeconomic and political stability often controlled by the private domain. The funding of public services by private entities emboldens the praxis of colonialism. From personal experience, in the 21st century, Boricuan youth are made to believe that the only way to progress as a nation is to culturally assimilate under a colonial state or U.S. annexation. This pedagogical approach serves as a tool rooted in colonial dynamics of power to categorize civility. Thus, education ceased to be a fundamental right and served an imperial power structure—as a system to control the consciousness of Boricuas. In my project, I inquire:

1. In what ways has the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico impacted the educational system in Puerto Rico over time?

2. How have Puerto Ricans mobilized in response to this colonial history and current education reforms?

Through interviews with education stakeholders and GIS mapping, this work assesses the progression of privatization as a form of colonial authority in Puerto Rico's education system by revealing how colonialism, operating through legislation and educational practices, limits any meaningful efforts to achieve social mobility and dismantle the oppressive systems that have chained Puerto Rico's past, present and future.

Historical Context

On November 25, 1897, Spain approved self-government for Boricuas with the Carta Autonómica (Library of Congress n.d.). Prior to Puerto Rico's first elections in March of 1898, the Spanish-American War progressed, and this autonomy was stripped by the U.S. When Congress ratified the Treaty of Paris in 1899 it solidified U.S. jurisdiction over Puerto Rico's economic, social, and intellectual prosperity, ushering in a new colonial era (Zambrana 2021, 54). As an island in the northeast of the Caribbean Sea, Puerto Rico furthered U.S. military interests. The U.S. gained military posts in towns bordering almost every region on the island, in towns like Mayagüez, Aguadilla, Aibonito, Cayey, Ponce, and San Juan, and on the island of Vieques (Library of Congress n.d.). Maintaining these military installations gave the U.S. significant control over the sugarcane, tobacco, and coffee industry. Claiming control over these industries boosted the U.S.' international stature as a world power and simultaneously seized Borinquens' autonomy.

The annexation of land propelled Boricuas to internalize a disconnection between themselves and their community character. Following an era of wanting to civilize Boricuas, language became a weapon to stereotype Boricuas as lazy individuals which parallels the historic

characterization of “savages,” unfit to self-govern. These caricatures arose from an agenda of assimilation that worked to systematically distance other Boricuas from their right to autonomy and further monopolize the island's resources for foreign domains that remain to this day (Zambrana, 2021, 58). The Supreme Court’s *Puerto Rico v. Sanchez Valle* ruling of 2016 and legislation like the Foraker Act of 1900,² the Insular Cases of 1902-1922, the Jones Acts of 1917³ and 1920, Law 600 of 1950, Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) of 2016, and Education Reform Act of 2018 have functioned to further usurp any semblance of political and economic autonomy for Boricuas over their island. These laws created legal pathways for economic exploitation which both reified the island's territorial status whilst undermining Boricuan identity. For decades, this system of monetary exploitation functioned as a point of social contention among Boricuas.

The search for economic development in Puerto Rico found its crux in the curation of benefits for foreigners through neoliberal policies. Act 20/22 of 2012 created legislation where foreigners could receive tax exemptions for businesses to promote the economic participation of foreigners on the island. Tax incentives were enabled by a reallocation of funds meant for the public education system like the University of Puerto Rico, public municipal services, living wage programs, and real estate prices to favor private investment and projects (Zambrana 2021, 9). In 2016, the enactment of PROMESA began to tether colonialism to the education system as the progression of privatization allowed the government to monopolize land and public resources. As of 2021, Puerto Rico holds \$74 billion in bond debt —\$49 billion is from unfunded

² The Foraker Act commodified the administration of Puerto Rico as a colonial territory by establishing a civil government in Puerto Rico. This law included no bill of rights for Boricuas and set up economic structures where the United States could collect taxes and duties in trading for the island. (Zambrana, 2021, 62)

³ The Jones Act of 1917 made PR an official U.S. Territory granting Boricuas U.S. citizenship by separating Puerto Rico’s Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches. Shortly after on May 18, 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act of 1917, permitting the Puerto Ricans to be drafted into U.S. military service and required any cargo shipments to be built, owned and operated by U.S citizens. (*Research Guides: A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States: 1917: Jones-Shafroth Act*, 2023)

pension obligations—and filed for bankruptcy under Title III of PROMESA (Zambrana 2021, 9). Pietrantoní Méndez & Álvarez (PMA), an Act 20 beneficiary law firm, directly benefited from debt on the island by serving as a legal advisor for around 56 government bond insurances worth over \$40 billion (Dennis 2020). With debt looming, the U.S. passed a law that created the Fiscal Oversight Board for Puerto Rico, otherwise known as *La Junta*⁴ to locals, to work in conjunction with the Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority (AAFAF).⁵ Together these agencies manage government resources concerning the island’s boastful billion-dollar debt and promote risk management in the education system with Julia Kehler as the Secretary of Education (Wessel 2022).

Rises in foreign investment on the island, exacerbated by Hurricane Maria, inflated U.S. dominion, especially in the education sector. In 2023, the Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency announced the island was classified as a 98% opportunity zone for foreign investment in low-income communities, specifically zones in Old San Juan, Guaynabo, Condado, and Roosevelt Roads in Ceiba (Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority n.d.). These calculations were purely based on the tax exemptions under Act 22 as municipalities give a 25% to 75% increase in tax exemptions along with a 25% tax exemption for a municipal license, net income for business activities, personal and/or real estate ventures, and municipal construction taxes (Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority n.d.). The catering of tax exemptions to private developers has eased the growth of debt on the island at the cost of the potential for equitable growth for its inhabitants.

⁴ *La Junta* is a term used by Boricuas to generalize the militarizing impact the fiscal Board has had on the island. In addition, the term *La Junta* facilitates conversation on contradicting governing forces prevalent on the island.

⁵ The AAFAF is currently a client of PMA along with 5 other major banks on the island; Pietrantoní Méndez & Álvarez LLC. (n.d.). *Our Clients* | *Pietrantoní Méndez & Álvarez LLC*. Pietrantoní Méndez & Álvarez LLC. Retrieved August 2, 2023, from <https://www.pmalaw.com/our-firm/our-clients/>

At this stage, foreign investment guided the future of the education system. Former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, appointed by *La Junta*, closed 428 public schools and created the Education Reform Act⁶ in 2018, otherwise known as LREPR. This was meant to redefine the educational future of Boricuas (Rubiano Yedidia et al. 2020). Within this new administration, education reform set the parameters of mobility in the nation as the Education Reform Act outlines that education should “exchange and adopt ideas from all sectors of Puerto Rican society” (LREPR 2018, 2). Legislators asserted that the economy would only prosper with strong educational foundations in modern society by saying education is “one of the most important factors to a nation’s production” (LREPR 2018, 2). Article 2.04, titled Duties and Responsibilities of the Secretary of Education, states the Secretary must

Enter into agreements, contracts and conventions with agencies or instrumentalities of the Government of Puerto Rico or its municipalities, as well as with agencies and instrumentalities of the federal government or the state and/or local governments of the U.S. or with persons or private entities, for the purposes of implementing this Law and achieving its purposes. (LREPR 2018, 31)

This proves legislation proves partnerships between the private and public sectors are considered “instrumentalities” in the overall progression of the island. Thus, there was a push at the government level to pull in private investment which government officials themselves used for their own wealth. After Julia Keleher was arrested for embezzling money from the education reform, schools remained shut down and were sold to limited liability companies (LLCs), forcing students out of the island and continuing the current education crisis (Virella 2022, 96). As a result, Boricuas' access to education ceased to be a fundamental right, becoming instead a means of profit.

⁶ Translated from *Ley de Reforma Educativa*

The Education Reform Act of 2018 mirrors the historic inability of the law to protect the rights of Boricuas, while the bill aims to

put the best interests of the students above all so that they can receive a quality education that allows them to fully develop their abilities and become full adults contributing to the wellbeing of our society from all areas. (LREPR 2018, 1)

Lawmakers created this legislation to offer more autonomy to municipalities and to empower an equitable education system by implementing more charter schools in Puerto Rico. The act of putting “the best interests of students above all” holds strong ties to foreign investment, as schools like Vimenti in San Juan have investors like the Harold Alfond Foundation from Maine and Colibri Learning from Canada and Major League Baseball (Vimenti n.d.). Whether or not these organizations receive tax exemptions from these donations is unknown, but the bill does not clarify the administration of these charter schools. The bill does ratify that investment would largely depend on the reallocation of public funds, but archives on charter schools show discrepancies. For example, Vimenti school’s DE profile says \$6,112 was the cost per student in 2020, while the Department’s Budget Office states the cost per student in 2020 was \$3,241—a school where 93% of the families enrolled in 2020 are low-income and 22% have one unemployed parent (Díaz Ramos 2022). Island-wide, 57% of children lived in poverty (Kids Count Data Center 2023) and 65.6% of students came from single-mother households in 2020 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.). If the Education Reform Act is meant to increase funding for the learning development of kids in low-income areas, where did the \$2,871 go, and what factors are at play in how the Act is currently operating? This is where my research comes in.

Research Methods

Theoretical Framework

The rhetoric used by government officials like the Secretary of the Department of Education, Eliezer Ramos Parés, shifted from “closed” schools to “consolidations” or refers to plans to close schools as plans “to rebuild the educational system” (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez 2022). Further investigation into what classifies as a “consolidation” is needed to identify an economic opportunity or progression through government-sponsored privatization of the real estate market through consolidated schools. To fulfill this project’s aim to analyze the variability of neoliberal-colonial structures of education and real estate developments, I chose an inductive approach to my research by conducting archival research, a series of interviews with various educators and politicians, and using GIS mapping.

Maps are an exemplary tool for assessing spatial history. By framing the diverse transformations of a given space through time within a certain praxis, maps are a significant technology for identifying and curating distinct socio-political narratives. Software like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) allows individuals with diverse technical backgrounds in data mapping to take part in the practice of historicizing spaces. Geographic discourse can empower the identities and lived experiences of underrepresented people by taking into account the institutionalized power that leads to loss. Simultaneously, as geography scholars conclude:

As a political technology, mapping has long played a key role in the world-making practices of colonialism through the appropriation, demarcation, naming, and partitioning of territory as part of the process of colonization and the assertion of imperial rule over peoples and places. (Rose-Redwood. et 2020)

Maps historicize certain narratives by curating a critical assessment of spatial human socialization. Spatial representation through a colonial lens calls for an active awareness of the paradoxical nature of land rights vs. the perception of progression or development. By comparing the findings of GIS mapping and interviews from educators in the field, legislation, and non-profit organizations I aim to marry the data to personal experience while maintaining the nuance between both. Thus, in the interview process, I wanted to create coded themes on the perception of Boricua identity regarding land ownership, community involvement in education, and government response to crisis and loss. To understand the nature of the education system from professionals in the field, I interviewed one private high school English teacher, Chana Torres Dávila, and a Head Start Coordinador in Corozal for students with special needs, Pablo Juan Rubio (who worked from 1992 to 2020). To gain a federal background I interviewed Lcd. Joel Vázquez Rosario, legislator of San Juan, and Omar Ayala Gonzalez, Co-Founder of Urbe A Pie. They offer a perspective on the conjunction of communal education efforts and the loss of Boricuan autonomy.

Mapping and Data Collection

The data collection process for this project was tedious and selective considering the convoluted nature of the Department of Education's records of school closures. For this investigation, a "closed school" refers to a school no longer operating and vacant by order of the Department of Education, and "scheduled closure" or "planned" refers to schools placed on a consolidation list by the Department of Education. The degree of closure is following how accessible schools are to students. After the Center of Investigative Journalism (CPI) published an article in January 2022 about the additional closure of schools under the new infrastructure plan from the Education Reform Act of 2018, the Department of Education removed access to an

interactive map that offered the consolidation plans of schools on the island and other transactions of school closure across districts in the island (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez 2022). All traces of the interactive map were blocked on all search engines like Safari, Firefox, Google, and Yahoo during this research process. The list of closed schools used on the second map was found via two main data sources; First, a CPI form archiving the list of scheduled closures from the Department of Education after it was revoked, and second, a list of government transactions of abandoned schools approved by the governmental Committee of Real Estate Appraisal and Disposition (CEDBI).⁷ Confirming the location of the schools and their status was through a manual verification process.

For the first map, the list of public schools from the CEDBI and CPI included information on their municipality and name. In two separate Excel files, one for scheduled closures and one for closed schools, I manually added their address from Google Maps to ensure their location and cross-referenced them to the County Office, the Public School Review, the National Center for Educational Statistics, and Escuelas de Puerto Rico to get the longitude and latitude. As a considerable amount of data was being manually controlled, cross-referencing the address and coordinates verified each school's coordinates to translate the right GEOID on GIS for each closed public school. The base layer is data from the June of 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) 2020 5-year estimate tables, specifically the Geographic Mobility by Poverty Status of Boicuas who moved from the U.S. Considering that data from 2020 is not as accessible given the effects of earthquakes in January in Puerto Rico and COVID-19, the school and census data were placed together to bridge the dichotomous nature of the year. The coastline

⁷ Translated from *Comité de Evaluación y Disposición de Bienes Inmuebles*

scale for the Puerto Rico shapefile used was created by the National Atlas of the U.S. (National Atlas of the United States 2023).

The second map shows the schools currently operating: public, private, and charter overlaid with vacancy rates. Access to data on private bilingual and charter schools was obtained in combination with Google Maps and government sites like the Directory of Public *Alianza* Schools, public charter schools. The list of public schools was gathered from the U.S. Department of Education Public School Characteristics of 2020-21 shapefile, which was updated on April 29, 2023 (Department of Education 2023). Vacancy rates were calculated using Housing Units Census Data accessed through Social Explorer 2021 ACS 5-year Estimates using the expression $(A10044_003: \text{Vacant}/A10044_001: \text{Housing Units}) \times 100$. Both were under the Equal Count mode.

Maps

Figure 1. Geographic Mobility: School Closures Over Total Estimate of People Who Moved to the U.S. in 2020

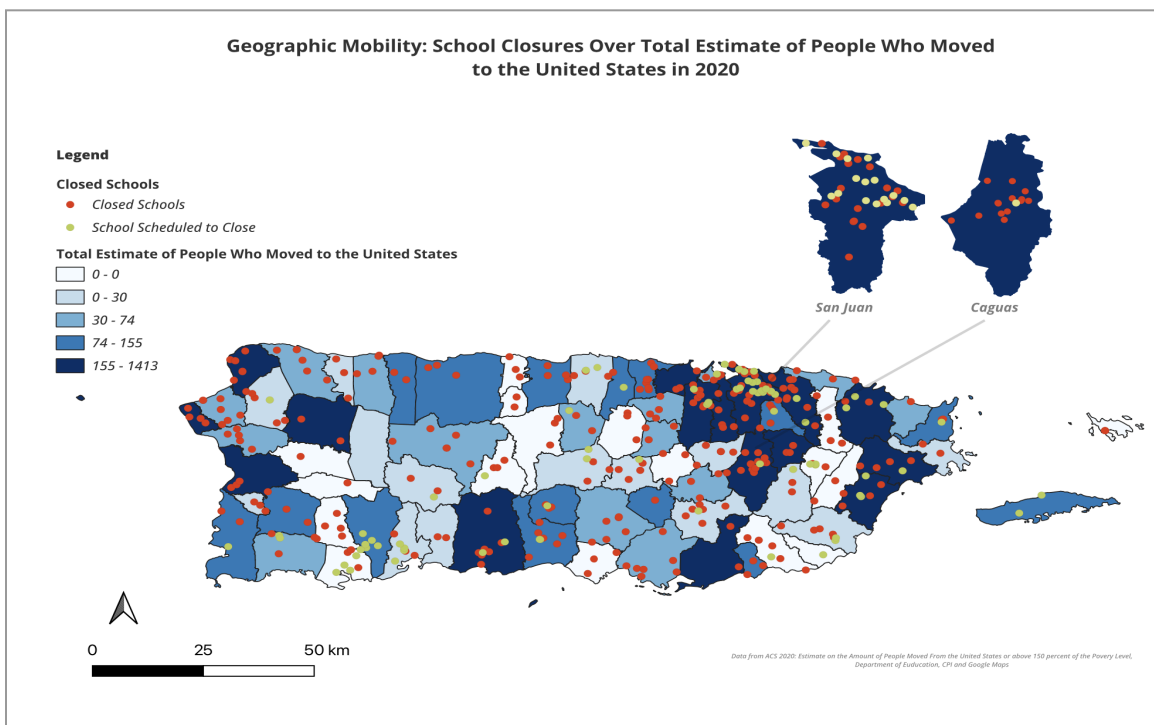
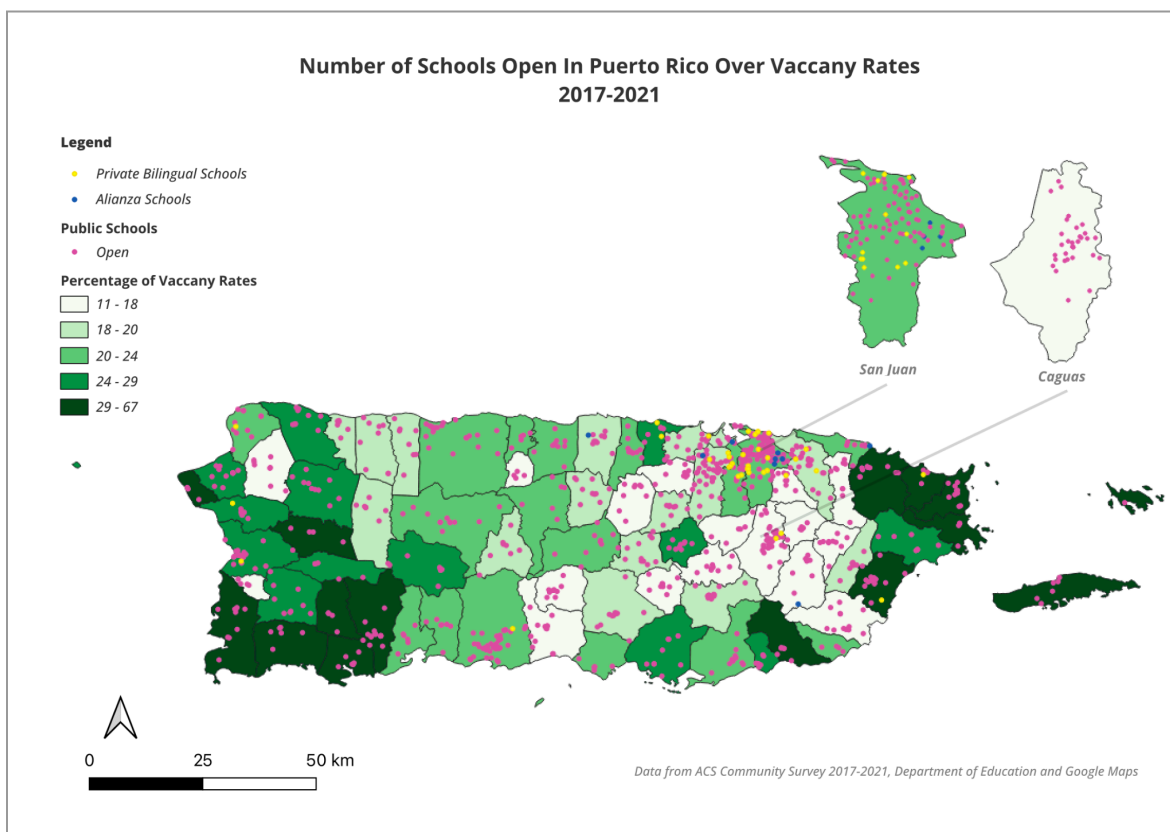


Figure 2. Number of Schools Open in Puerto Rico Over Vacancy Rates 2017-2021



Discussion

Education Reform and Americanization

The education system reveals how the promise of economic prosperity in Puerto Rico instilled a permanent relationship of Americanization to manipulate Boricuan autonomy. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 encouraged schools in the U.S. and Puerto Rico to promote English by reallocating funds to support English programs (Lefty 2021). After declaring Puerto Rico as an *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA), the expansion of U.S. education on the island was driven by the “*batalla de la producción*”⁸ from Operation Bootstrap in the 1950s to increase the presence of English and vocational schools on the island (Lefty 2021). The globalization of English and its prominence on the island created a currency system to measure intelligence and respect by shifting the island's linguistic diversity. Schools were designed to increase the proficiency rate of English under Anglo-Saxon ideals of what knowledge should represent and increase knowledge of industrial production skills through vocational school.

Education policy like the Bilingual Education Act, in the context of Puerto Rico, reflects historical practices of civilizing and modernizing Boricuas with a U.S. imperialistic economic system. Operation Bootstrap was one of the earliest pieces of legislation to ostracize and strip Boricuas of economic autonomy as it gave U.S. companies complete tax exemption and cheap labor from people who graduated from these vocational schools (Lefty 2021). The Auxiliary Secretary of Education Osvaldo Rodríguez Pacheco argued that “education is almost the entire answer to the problem of the Island”—remarks based on the progression of job opportunities (Lefty 2021). From 1932 to 1957 around 104,300 students began engaging in vocational education like sales, electric work, file clerking, bookkeeping, and stenography (Lefty 2021).

⁸ Battle for production

The enforcement of English in schools and the commodification of a neoliberal market on education hijacked every aspect of Boricuan culture. Codifying English as a superior language enforced intersubjective categories of labor, race, and culture.

Fiscal mismanagement of education bled into 2012 under the pro-statehood guidance of ex-Governor Luis Fortuño, who drove “Generation Bilingual” in schools. The Department of Education expected students to graduate by 2022 with a mastery of both English and Spanish by organizing schools to prioritize teaching English. As scholar Funie Hsu highlights, this prioritization allowed students to “seize the opportunities of the global world,” furthering the development of the neoliberal global market (Hsu 2015). In return, teachers are prioritized based on their ability to incentivize neoliberal educational practices—education becomes a tool of empowerment and a means to produce human capital for the progression of civility through the development of charter schools.

In 2018 the Education Reform Act aimed to ameliorate the inequitable distribution of education through charter schools. The key distinction between charter and public schools is their management. Charter schools are publicly funded through legislative contracts but operate independently from state regulations and curriculum thereby allowing more autonomy in the administration of schools (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.). The demand for charter schools increased as parents wanted choice over learning styles and school management for their children. The rise of school choice created a market for more options that were not exclusively private schools. Between 1998 and 2002, a total of 125 charter schools were established by the U.S. Department of Education, before the island-wide establishment of charter schools post-Maria (Burriss & Pflieger n.d.). Again, in 1996 and 1999 the DOE gave two grants of over \$5 million to open two new charter schools (Burriss & Pflieger n.d.). Thirteen years later, amid school

choice in 2015, Puerto Rico was “not payable” according to Governor Garcia Padilla, thus the severity of debt established an alliance between private and public sectors in which private actors were “building and making the infrastructure” according to the director of the Public-Private Partnerships Authority (AAPP) Davis Álvarez (Noticel 2012). In partnership with the AAPP, under the servitude of the “public-private alliance” in the 2010s, over 480 schools serving K-12 grades were closed between 1990, 167 schools were closed in 2016-2017, and an additional 255 schools closed between 2017 and 2018 (Rosario 2018). School closures were not an unprecedented action in Puerto Rico before *La Junta*, but formalized colonial models of leadership that favored private domains on the island accelerated the closure rate, with 65% of closures occurring in rural areas (Hinojosa et al. 2019). The mismanagement of public services created a foundation where “paradise” no longer served Boricuas. In the years of these closures, school facilities were unfit to be in, causing enrollment rates to drop and migration out of Puerto Rico to increase (Brusi 2020).

Private schools on the island follow this public-private alliance to a separate degree. In my interview with Chana Torres Dávila, an English teacher, she affirms “*La cultura de educación en Baldwin⁹ es más el negocio de los padres. En Baldwin puede comprar la educación [...] El que no tiene dinero no tiene acceso a una educación en el país y el currículo es muy Americano.*”¹⁰ Dávila’s experience with the education system in Puerto Rico is rich in history as it offers an array of perspectives on the interaction between the private, public, and military schools in Puerto Rico. Her early childhood education at Escuela Papa Juan is a stark contrast to the resources and environment schools she recalls “*no había materiales. Era una falta de*

⁹ Baldwin School was one of the first IB schools on the island where the total cost for a regular 12th-grade tuition average at \$17,843; Baldwin of School of Puerto Rico. (n.d.). https://www.baldwin-school.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=239917&type=d&pREC_ID=2378427

¹⁰ The culture behind education in Baldwin is pure business for the parents. In Baldwin you can buy your way in, buy your education. If you don’t have money you don’t have access to education in this island and the curriculum is too American.

*dignidad que los pupitres están rotos, no había tecnología y los salones con 43 estudiantes.”*¹¹

For high school, she attended military school in Buchanan where “*te daban detención si no te ponías las mando en el pecho para el American Flag. Si no cantabas y si no te parabas.*”¹² The element of needing to fight for education is more often inherited in public schools as they are not as favorable based on the government's continuous neglect and budget cuts. Thus, there is a subtle veil, as Torres highlights, where the push for privatization on the island through charter and private schools, she stated “*tenemos un velo cultural y social. Aquí la gente le gusta el velo porque el velo viene con Costco, viene con una realidad más accesible.*”¹³ Through these notions of education come new systemic models of survival that fit into the lives of a few elites on the island, a veil is instilled to keep education as a marker of social stature furthering her argument of the island being in “an intellectual apocalypse.”

Displacement Magnified: Public-Private Alliances

The marginalization of education for profit feeds a divide between opportunity and land rights. If the government closes schools and reallocates students to sell titles through Acts 20 and 22, education serves to fund foreign interest. Brain Tenebaum, a beneficiary since December 2014 of Act 22 has multiple contracts with the Department of Transportation and Public Works on the island under numerous LLCs including Mr. Blue Ocean LLC, Mr. Bull LLC, and Shinrai Holdings LLC — all of which have been used to buy school property (Dennis 2020). The first school bought under Mr. Blue Ocean LLC, Escuela Antonio Sácnhec Ruiz in Aguada, was bought for \$260,000 on March 8th, 2019. Aguda has a 26% vacancy rate, shown in Figure 1, with low mobility (limited movement to the U.S.) at 33 people who moved from the U.S. in

¹¹ “There were no materials. There was a lack of dignity with having desks broken and no technology in a classroom of 40 students.”

¹² “They (the administration) would give you detention if you did not put your hand over your heart, sing or stand for the American National Anthem”

¹³ “We have a cultural and social veil. Here people like it and want it because with this veil we get things in return like Costco—a reality that is more accessible”

2020, shown in Figure 2. Escuela Carmen Gómes Tejera in Aguadilla, which offers education to kids with special needs, was sold for \$780,000 on May 24, 2019, under Mr. Bull LLC (Díaz Ramos 2020). Unlike Aguada, Aguadilla holds a 22% vacancy rate, shown in Figure 2, and a moderate mobility rate of 233 people in Figure 1. On April 15, 2019, Shinrai Holdings LLC bought Escuela Martín Grove Brumbaugh, otherwise known as Escuela Puerta Tierra for \$500,000. San Juan was at the highest mobility with 1413 people per figure 1 and a vacancy rate of 24% per figure 2. San Juan, unlike the rest, holds a greater history of gentrification on the island.



Inside and Outside the abandoned Escuela Elemental Martín G. Brumbaugh in Puerta Tierra 2023 (Aimar Rosario Ávila)

The presence of Act 20/22 beneficiaries is more popular in San Juan given its colonial touristic culture. While interviewing San Juan Legislator Joel Vazqu ez Rosario, he affirmed “*no somos la misma poblaci n de a os atr s[...] el sistema educativo hace ver como si el sistema fuera malo. Causa que las familias piensen que los ni os deben estar en escuela privada en vez de p blicas.*”¹⁴ Vazqu ez argues the mass exodus occurring on the island stems from the political and economic instability of the island and more importantly a failure in the education system's ability to reflect modern concerns in the curriculum. Considering changes in the global market Vazqu ez suggests schools don't promise jobs. Schools have the funding to create change but educational pedagogies adhere to a colonial market where the capital and bureaucracy on land management pertinent to school closures overrules initiatives for students to perceive education as a tool for mobility.

A study from economist and Professor Jos  Craballo Cueto at the University of Puerto Rico showed around 33,704 students have dropped out since 2015 with data gathered from the Department of Education's public school system (Caraballo Cueto 2021). In the 2020-21 academic school year, the Department of Education reported 54 cases where students dropped out with an additional 448 cases of students under an unknown status— 2,769 since 2015 (Encarnaci n Mart nez 2022). This same year 12,132 students failed the academic school year (Metro, 2022). Financial burdens play a significant role in dropout rates since 86.1% of students who dropped out were classified as low-income, the average family income of dropouts was \$10,986 (Caraballo Cueto 2021). Around 8,893 students were “not able to wait” based on financial strife, 8,526 students transferred to night school, and 8,675 students moved to alternative or accelerated programs.

¹⁴ “We are not the same population 20 years ago [...] the public education system makes it seem as if the system as a whole were bad. It causes families to think their kids should be in a private school instead of public”

Considering the socio-economic relationship between dropout rates and the decline of modern curriculum value per education stakeholders, closing schools is not the answer to achieving social mobility. Notwithstanding, by the year 2026 the Department of Education's "vision of the future" plan supported by the Education Reform Act proposes consolidating an additional 83 schools — displacing around 18,644 students (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez 2022). Currently, 18 schools have closed from 2019-2020 per Figure 2 with an additional 16 scheduled to close as shown in Figure 1. Two of the schools that are planned to close are specialized schools in music: Escuela Libre de Música Ernesto Ramos Antonini in San Juan and Escuela Central Artes Visuales in San Juan— an area with a high presence of gentrification and a part of Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority "opportunity zones."

From this plan, certain municipalities are at a higher risk like Vieques where schools like Escuela Adrienne Serrano have remained without access to a lunchroom or food security since Hurricane María in 2017. The school relies on other schools like Juanita Rivera Albert to supply food for students. The Germán Rieckehoff High School is the only vocational school in Vieques and one of the few that offers services for students with special needs, closing it would leave these students without proper resources (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez 2022). In Yabucoa, where 25% of families' annual income is around \$10,000, the DOE plans to close four more schools: Escuela Elemental Rosa Costa Valdivieso, Escuela Marta Sánchez Alverio, Escuela José F. Cintrón y Anexo, and Escuela Manuel Ortiz which displaces around 579 students (Díaz Ramos & Encarnación Martínez 2022). Fluctuations between resources in public education transform the mobility of students on the island.

The neoliberal and colonial foundation of the public education system induces loss. In 2021, 73,233 students went to study in the U.S. and 16,681 to attend private schools— affecting 73% of enrollment in the public education sector¹⁵ (Caraballo Cueto 2021). At the time, there are a total of 177,243 students in Puerto Rico (Baldwin 2021). The revised fiscal plan from *La Junta* in 2019 seeks to have an average of 14 students per teacher compared to “districts on the mainland such as Miami-Dade County” but public school teachers affirm the average is around 21.6 students per classroom (Caraballo Cueto 2021). As for costs, 14 out of 20 teachers spent an average of \$237.50 on materials like new fans, air conditioning, paper, printers with ink, pens, pencils, et cetera.— which should be covered under the Title I education fund (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2019). With the new school year beginning, the new Secretary of the Department of Education Yanira Raíces declared \$400,000 worth of frozen meals for schools in the Ponce region were confirmed as lost as of July 2023 (Ruiz 2023). Prioritizing the privatization of land and public resources like education curates a future isolated from the needs of Boricuas.

In my interview with Omar Ayala González, leader of the nonprofit URBE a Pie in Caguas, they highlight how the closure of schools creates a culture of loss. As an organization, URBE a Pie, as the name references, aims to re-establish a sense of community for Boricuas by reclaiming abandoned public spaces in the metropolitan area of Caguas. The group has successfully claimed 4 spots: Huerto Feliz, Valle Garita, la Boutique Comunitaria, and el Museo de la Higuera all of which reflect this mission of giving the low-income community of Caguas “*un espacio donde la comunidad puede ejercer poder*” since to Omar “*se nos han desmantelado todo.*”¹⁶ Caguas, around an hour away from San Juan, has a poverty rate of 37.5% from 2017 to

¹⁵ The calculation for transfers to charter schools may not be directly reflected in these statistics.

¹⁶ “A space where the community itself can practice and embody power”& “If not we lose everything”

2021 (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.) with a 16% vacancy rate per Figure 2 and a high rate of mobility at 388 per Figure 1. Omar confesses “*vivimos un cultura de la soledad*”¹⁷ because there is “a panorama of isolation and absence of service” for the everyday Boricuas.

Urbe A Pie was founded as a direct response to the culture of loss prevalent in Borinquen by bringing forth an initiative to reclaim spaces “lost” or unused for communities. Their headquarters in Caguas offer parking to other organizations like Centro de Apoyo Mutuo—a non-profit food distribution initiative established in a school closed by the government but reclaimed as a community kitchen after Maria in 2017 feeding over 25,000 Boricuan families (Comedores Sociales 2022). In 2015 the Act 22 beneficiary Morgan Reed Group bought the school for \$108,000, a quarter of \$400,000 market value (Comedores Sociales 2022). After having occupied the space for 6 years in May 2022, the group wanted to sell the school for \$360,000 (Comedores Sociales 2022). CAM, Urbe A Pie, and other organizations mobilized to stop the transfer of title. The spirit of mutual aid resuscitated the community by offering avenues to mobilize resources to the community—thereby unbinding plans to gentrify the area and its’ colonial ties.

Conclusion

In the case of Plyer v. Doe, the case argued "Education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society" and "provides the basic tools by which individuals might lead economically productive lives to the benefit of us all" (Smallwood Ramos 2020). In the case of Puerto Rico, the accumulation of “benefits” from education signifies a privatization of land and resources. Under the tutelage of privatization, education resorts to the consolidation of schools, rather than fixing the infrastructure of public schools. Pablo Juan Rubio, former Head

¹⁷ “We live in a culture of solitude”

Start Coordinador in Coroza, argues “quisieran eliminar nuestra cultura dentro del programa.”¹⁸ Rubio recalls how children who are 3-5 years old learn of urban life in the context of New York as the program models Head Start schools from this district. According to him, in a region like Corozal, tucked between mountains, the curriculum lacks a connection to the student's context. Teachers and students must assimilate to an educational formula set by foreign standards. Thus, despite the new Education Reform Act, in the case of Rubio’s school, the curriculum fails to adequately provide a practical understanding of the urban design infrastructure in Puerto Rico.

Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 prove the desire to assimilate to foreign standards bleeds into the spatial dynamics in Puerto Rico. A longstanding issue is not only the need to denounce the neoliberal colonial relationships of public-private alliances but also the interdisciplinary perspective of education and urban planning. At its core, school consolidations and closures are not being assessed at a planning level rather the focus stays on the management of schools overall and government budget cuts. Only by understanding the dominion of private education through land management can there be a critical assessment of the colonial practices catalyzing the reduction of Boricuan infrastructure and the displacement of Boricuas. Creating more unions where people can offer education initiatives founded by Boricuan values actively fosters the building ground for a system where Boricuas can become more autonomous. Without a steady practice of interdisciplinary perspective in the education system and urban planning continuing to adhere to an agenda of privatization to further investment, the island becomes a Borinquen without Boricuas.

¹⁸ “They (the U.S. government and the it’s colonial agents) want to eradicate our culture from education programs”

Next Steps

1. Collaborate with nonprofits on the island to expand a more inclusive agenda of education in Puerto Rico
 - a. Ex: Gender and Sexual education under a decolonial lens
2. Examine the state of education reform for teachers by aiming to create a support network of teachers in the private and public sectors

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