
Original Paper

The History and Culture of the United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico: A Historical Brief

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Abstract

This historical brief is the first paper in a two-part series. The purpose of this historical brief was to engage the reader in a conversation about the history and culture of Puerto Rico. This relatively small island has been under colonial rule for centuries by Spain and now the United States. In that context, the residents of Puerto Rico have historically and still contemporarily face challenges (e.g., economic constraints, school closings, poverty, job insecurities, natural disasters). However, Puerto Rican people have a rich and diverse cultural history which is manifested in their foods, music, dance, language, valuing of family, and their resilience to overcome challenges—both manufactured (by mostly men) and natural disasters.

Keywords: Colonizers, School closings, Values, Hurricane Mar ía, Governments

1. Introduction to the History and Culture: Puerto Rico

The United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a subtropical island archipelago located in the northeastern boundary of the Caribbean Sea (18°N, 66°W). It is the smallest of the Greater Antilles following Cuba, Hispaniola (Dominican Republic and Haiti), and Jamaica (Hernández-Delgado et al., 2012). Puerto Rico has a complex and dynamic history with a unique and multidimensional culture¹ mostly due to its rich mixture of people from diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. In this paper, we articulate a brief overview of Puerto Rico's history and culture. Many other scholars have discussed in greater detail key historical events in the history of Puerto Rico. You should read such works as Ayala and Bernabe's (2007) *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898*; and Nelson A. Denis' (2015) *War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony*.

Historically speaking, Puerto Rico was colonized by Spain in 1508 (Ahearn, 1979; Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). First, Spanish colonizers began enslaving Taíno men while breeding with the indigenous women, giving rise to the first mixed-race in Puerto Rico, native-born citizens. Further on, the Spanish settlers started bringing in Black African slaves to work the fields and raise cities. As the years went by, Puerto Rico saw immigrants from Italy, Corsica, Germany, China, and Lebanon come to the island and provide their unique perspectives and cultural input. When Spain lost the Spanish-American War of 1898 and ceded Puerto Rico to the United States (U.S.), the island gained its new colonizer, with imposed military governors and leaders (Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). Moreover, Puerto Rico saw an influx of Cuban refugees fleeing conditions in Fidel Castro's Cuba, and immigrants from the Dominican Republic who sought to escape the precarious economy there (Rivera, 2019).

The main influences on the cultural heritage in Puerto Rico were African, Indian, Spanish, and American. Spanish rule in Puerto Rico lasted nearly 400 years. During this time, the island was exposed to Roman Catholicism, Spanish language, and the view of the family as preeminently important in society. In addition, the Spanish brought their music and philosophy of life (Ahearn, 1979).

However, “the Spanish-American War of 1898 led to the installation of U.S. colonial governments in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam” (Ayala & Bernabe, 2007, p. 1). Ayala and Bernabe (2007) explained further that although the Philippines became independent in 1946, Puerto Rico and Guam remain under the United States authority still today. Puerto Rico, a small subtropical island, “thus became an anomaly: a colony of a fundamentally noncolonial imperialism” (Ayala & Bernabe, 2007, p. 1).

Culture and History in Schools. Since 1948—under U.S. sovereignty, Puerto Rico has overseen its formal education system—prior to this transformation it was under strict colonial rule for nearly four centuries under Spain (1508-1898) and now the United States since 1898. Under the Spanish regime, the Catholic Church oversaw education. During the Spanish regime, illiteracy levels on the island reached between 79% and 85%. While just 16.7% of school-aged children attended school (Quintero, 2017).

In 1898, the United States (U.S.) of America invaded Puerto Rico as part of their military campaign against Spain. In 1899, using the U.S. military power, the government closed the Civil Institute of Second Education and the standard school system, both were Spanish educational structures. Forced by the military, the U.S. attempted to re-organize public education in Puerto Rico to match public education in the U.S. In 1900, the Foraker Act², the first organic law under the new U.S. regime, established a civilian government in Puerto Rico (Library of Congress, n.d.). This Act also established the position of Commissioner of Instruction and the Department of Public Instruction. The U.S. regime utilized the public education system as part of an Americanization³ program and designed the education system based on the following considerations.

- The principles of separation of State and Church established by the U.S. Constitution meant that the public schools became completely independent from the Catholic Church.
- Both elementary and secondary schools were established for all socioeconomic classes and any discrimination by sex was banned.
- The U.S. established the same guidelines as in the continental U.S. education system in this new Puerto Rican context without considering local culture, history, or other factors.
- They developed an administrative system with an almost absolute centralization. Throughout the early years of the U.S. administration, the commissioner of education not only directed the public schools but also simultaneously presided over the University of Puerto Rico higher education system and the Board of Trustees.
- School was becoming an instrument to culturally distinguish the Puerto Rican population with the North American nation. The teaching of the English language not only obtained unique importance inside the curriculum, but at one point, there were attempts to eliminate Spanish as the first language.

As can be expected, these elements caused a strong reaction in Puerto Rico. In 1912, the Association of Teachers of Puerto Rico was created; it proclaimed itself in support of the teaching of several topics in Spanish. The resulting controversy continued until 1949 when Don Mariano Villaronga (1946-1947 and 1949-1957) became the Secretary of Public Instruction. Spanish was then again accepted as the official language.

With the election of Luis Muñoz Marín – the first elected governor – in 1948, Puerto Rico obtained more control over the development of the public system of Puerto Rico’s Department of Education (or Departamento de Educacion) and the University of Puerto Rico systems. In the 1950s, under the Secretary of Public Instruction, Mariano Villaronga, the Department of Public Instruction sought to guarantee that every child of elementary school age was enrolled in school. In ten years, they implemented a facility expansion plan, and they successfully enrolled 54% of the school-aged population (50% between the ages of 16 to 18, 85% between the ages of 13 to 15 years, and 93% between the ages of 6 to 12 years). Through 1954, every six-year-old child was registered in first grade. This accelerated increase in student influx focused on education quality. The 1960s was then proclaimed as the Decade of Education (Ahearn, 1979). There is no question that the circumstances in which teachers work have significant influence on how they think (Rios, 1996), and what and how they

teach (Hodge et al., 2021). Certainly, all qualified professionals need to be conscious of the specific contextual factors that relate to a particular setting (Montero-Sieburth, 1989). Part of the context in which teachers work is molded by social and cultural aspects (Hodge et al., 2021).

Puerto Ricans' Cultural Values. Three hundred and eighty-one years of influence from Spain, the Spanish-American War, and now the influence of the U.S. have all highly shaped Puerto Rican values. Those values include creating and maintaining a capitalistic economic system; expanding the values of Protestant religion; and providing Puerto Ricans various benefits as U.S. citizens consisting of voting rights, migrating freely to the continental U.S. with no restrictions, and serving in the U.S. military, as examples. Clearly, Puerto Rico had evolved into a culturally diverse society (Ahearn, 1979). As stated before, the culture of Puerto Rico is a complex and multidimensional one that involves the origin of its language, food, music, gender roles, religions, and festivals, that is in constant evolution. However, whether living in Puerto Rico or off the island in the continental U.S. or other countries—either through eager migration or reluctant relocation from untenable situations back home (in Puerto Rico), people who live outside of Puerto Rico are proud to say that they are first and foremost Puerto Ricans. They will use a simple verbal expression with which to express a patriotic and separatist belief from the continental U.S. (Duany, 2002). The usual phrase used is “*¡Yo soy Boricua, pa' que tú lo sepas!*”, which means “I am *Boricua*, just so you know,” ‘*Boricua*’ referring to the original Taíno name for Puerto Rico, ‘*Borikén*’. After that, depending on the situation, they will establish that they are U.S. citizens. In general, Puerto Ricans possess a collection of cultural values that are like other Latin American people elsewhere, and most predominant to Puerto Ricans’ cultural values are respect, family structure, personalism, fatalistic perspectives, religion, *compadrazgo*, and *machismo* (Ahearn, 1979). Moreover, Puerto Rico’s culture is reflected in food, music and dance, traditions and cultural festivities, entertainment, and sports, and more.

Respect. Respect indicates recognition of one’s position inside the social system where one shows or anticipates deference. Specific individuals, depending on their achieved or ascribed status, are clearly identified as deserving of obeisance and esteem. In Puerto Rico, for example, teachers, fathers, grandfathers, or priests often receive special treatment by those in perceived lower socioeconomic positions. According to the 2019 Global Surveys of Value for Puerto Rico, 77% of participants responded that they think it is especially important to teach children tolerance and respect towards others (Hernández-Acosta, 2019).

Family Structure. Typically, the Puerto Rican family is a very close unit and includes mother, father, grandparents, relatives, and children. In this structure, a person obtains security, confidence, and a sense of identity. In addition, each person has a clearly defined place, which brings responsibilities and obligations. Much in the same way a mother or a father has the moral responsibility to guarantee security and provide for their children, it is expected that those children develop the moral obligation to guarantee and provide for their parents (Marrero, 2014). Households composed of three or more generations (multigenerational, extended family) represent 4.4% of total households in Puerto Rico. According to Bezares and Cartagena (2012), the high cost of living today could force families to make new living arrangements, especially in families with children born to single mothers living with the family of origin.

Personalism. Personalism refers to the complex collection of personal relationships and interactions which is reflective of a Puerto Rican culture. This cultural value stresses the person’s internal qualities that create her or his individuality and personal worth. Commonly, a Puerto Rican will situate personal relationships significantly higher than one’s obligation to work or the social system. This can explain why Puerto Ricans will typically have a set of personal relationships and social contacts that are used for political and economic purposes. These powerful relationships often consist of a mutual pattern of obligations and responsibilities and highlight *who you know* and not *what you know* (Ahearn, 1979).

Fatalism. Fatalistic views originate from religious beliefs. This fatalistic perspective generates a personal sense of destiny in a world governed by divine providence. Fatalism refers to a general belief that the course of fate cannot be changed and that life events are beyond one’s control (Abraño-Lanza et al., 2007). Because of facing poverty and being exposed to everyday physical and symbolic violence, fatalistic statements may be the result of a cumulative chain of past negative events (Abraño-Lanza et

al., 2007). This belief is verbalized by “*Que Sea lo que Dios quiere*” (“whatever is God’s will”), which is the willingness of people to take even calamity as the will of God. Puerto Ricans with this “deterministic attitude”; in other words, this view that God determines what happens, typically try to adjust to the world of the present instead of trying to change aspects for the future (Ahearn, 1979). Abra ño-Lanza et al. (2007) questioned the assumption that *fatalism* is a cultural characteristic of Latinx populations. Abra ño-Lanza and colleagues (2007) proposed more extensive empirical analysis of how socioeconomic status and other factors (e.g., limited access to health care, oppression, and racism) may manifest *fatalism* (Abra ño-Lanza et al., 2007).

Religion. Religion in Puerto Rico includes a philosophy comprised of superstitions and religious beliefs, and often rules the lives for some Puerto Ricans. In various parts of the Puerto Rican community, religious leaders function as priest-physician-psychiatrist, exert influence and demand respect from the community. Based on the 2019 Global Surveys of Value for Puerto Rico, 65.2% of the respondents indicated that religion is important in their lives (Hernández-Acosta, 2019). Roman Catholics comprise most of the population in Puerto Rico (Pew Research Center, 2014). In Puerto Rico, Catholicism is the largest (85%) religious denomination followed by Protestants (8%), other denominations (3%), and lastly non-religion (2.3%).

Compadrazgo. *Compadrazgo* is the process of integrating others into the family unit using the religious ritual of baptism and linking it to the value of extended family. “El padrino” or the godfather, typically a person of better status and influence in the family, obtains power, family membership, and respect in exchange for special privileges and protection. This represents not only a symbolic but a real meaning in Puerto Rican families. More recently, and apropos to modern-day Puerto Rican politics, the perception is that ‘godfathers’ function like sponsors, people who vouch for a particular candidate and welcome this person into their select company despite other better suited candidates being available. An example is illustrated by ousted former Puerto Rican governor Ricardo Rosselló—elected largely due to his family privilege and power—and his highly publicized mobile chat, in which he and several hand-picked cabinet members (not so incidentally, all male, which ties in with the following conception of *machismo*) made fun of women, LGBT+, obese, impoverished and even deceased people, and joked about their political enemies (Metro Puerto Rico, 2019).

Machismo. *Machismo* is the quality of masculinity, which is valued and stressed in all Latinx cultures, exhibited with the qualities of independence, strength, and courage. Masculinity includes those value and belief systems that shape the social relations among men and between men and women (Griffith, 2015). There is an understanding of privilege which indicates Latino males in superior authority and double standard of sexual license, which gives males more freedom regarding sexual expression. *Machismo* delineates expected female roles. The man assumes the power to exercise authority and make decisions in the family as long the woman acts deferentially toward her husband, caring for the children and the household. Over history, Puerto Rican families have encountered changes which have shaped relationships and structures in families, creating crisis and transformation. Still today, *machismo* is common in Puerto Rico, for example, even the former Governor of Puerto Rico Ricardo Rosselló, when in the controversial leaked mobile chat, referred to Melissa Mark Viverito, Counselor Municipality of New York, as “whore”. When a “*machista*” person wants to belittle, dehumanize, and degrade a woman, they use these kinds of words. This *machismo* is reflected in Puerto Rican society with 3,880 incidents of domestic violence (mostly perpetrated by men against women) in 2019 (Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres, 2019).

As evidenced by the many accounts, Puerto Ricans still respond to this vast collection of cultural values, emphasized by Ahearn. These values represent a significant difference between the Puerto Rican and the predominantly White North American culture. In that, Latinx populations attribute higher emphasis on interpersonal exchange of feelings and revealing emotions contrasted to normalized White American culture (Ahearn, 1979).

Cuisine (Foods and Cookery)

Puerto Rico’s culture has been influenced and enriched by the combination of both immigrants arriving to the island since 1492, and native residents over the years. For example, Puerto Rican cuisine has been generally derived from the fusion of flavors used by the native Ta ños who lived on the island,

early Spanish colonizers, and African slaves brought in later. The food prepared by the Taños was characterized by large amounts of native products and ingredients. They liked to cook roots such as yautá, sweet potatoes, and cassava, and pre-Columbian staples such as corn, in addition to fishing and hunting. The Spanish brought eggplant, cilantro, onion, garlic, and alcoholic drinks such as rum to Puerto Rico. The African influence was reflected in cooking styles and the use of plantain. This fusion of cultures has made cuisine in Puerto Rico very delicious (e.g., alcapurrias, arroz con gandules, asopao, empanadallias, mofongo, platanos maduros, pasteles, perrnil, rellenos de papa, tostones), one that has been recognized for its distinctive mix of flavors. Today, however, 80% of the products consumed in Puerto Rico are imported (Hernández et al., 2017).

Music and Dance

Puerto Ricans are not only characterized by their food choices, but also by their music. Like food, music has been influenced by both locals and people who arrived in Puerto Rico from other countries and shared their cultural expressions. Puerto Rican music has had an impact on the identity and sense of self for Puerto Ricans on the island and beyond. Indigenous Taños used instruments such as maracas and güiros, made with dried gourds and seeds. They played such instruments in their religious ceremonies called Areytos, for example. Areytos were the maximum spiritual and artistic expression made by Taños (Quintero, 2017).

Later, as colonization efforts grew, Black slaves from Africa were brought in, with strong roots in their ancestral beliefs and socio-cultural traditions, associated to their music and dance. African people developed their dance and traditions in towns located along the coasts of Puerto Rico. They incorporated mostly percussion instruments. For them, the music was also a means to disperse news or, later with the forced application of Western Christianity, practice *santer ú*. The *bomba* and *plena* music and dance in Puerto Rico has its origins in African culture (Quintero, 2017). The Spanish brought with them instruments such as the guitar. Spanish inhabitants mostly used their music for official or government events, religious ceremonies (e.g., Catholic services) and social events in the town centers in different cities in Puerto Rico (Quintero, 2017).

Further, the Spanish colonizers brought Christianity along with them, and the food and music that developed from all the cultures previously referenced were then used in religious holidays. An aspect of African culture still seen today is the traditional *vejigante* festivals, wherein artisans hand carves and paints coconut shell masks, often decorating them with horns and fangs. This influence of alcohol and celebrations was a strategy used by the Spanish government called "dance, drink and dice", a Spanish colonial take on '*panem et circenses*', aimed at controlling the local Puerto Rican residents while keeping them entertained, which implied that they would not think about revolution to be free from colonization efforts.

Traditions and Cultural Festivities

Today in Puerto Rico, many of the traditions and cultural festivities that had their origins in their ancestors are still being celebrated. When speaking about Puerto Rican traditions, it is important to highlight the following. Puerto Rico is home to the longest Christmas celebrations world-wide. In Puerto Rico, the Christmas celebration starts during or the day after the Thanksgiving Day holiday, which was itself brought in because of North American colonization. This holiday is full of traditional celebrations, folkloric music with small musical bands visiting friends and family at their homes, much like carolers. These bands include a variety of culturally important instruments: the *panderos de plena* (percussion instruments), guitars or *cuatro Puertorriqueño* (liken to guitar) *guiro* and *maracas*. Then Puerto Ricans prepare for a Christmas Eve night, which is a family and friend celebration where traditional holiday food is consumed, such as roast pork, rice with green pigeon peas, *pasteles*, and so on.

In addition, family members and friends play group games such as the popular game of dominos. There are several alcoholic drinks preferred during the holiday season, but the most cherished drinks include *Pitorro* (Puerto Rican's Moonshine) and the *Coquito* (liken to eggnog), drinks which often rely on a family recipe for mixing and preparing. Then they celebrate Christmas Day, with children receiving presents from the imaginary Santa Claus through the influence of North American culture. It is worth

noting that many conservative and traditional families resist this notion since there are no chimneys in Puerto Rico and it is traditionally Catholic, meaning that the church celebrates the day of the birth of Jesus. Then Puerto Ricans prepare for the celebration of the New Year's Eve on December 31, followed by January 5, which is the Three Wise Men's (or Three Kings) Day Eve. This more Spanish-oriented holiday is a day where children look for grass and water to put under the bed (to feed the Wise Men's camels or horses, much like how North American children leave out milk and cookies for the imaginary Santa Claus) waiting for their gifts the next morning. After January 6, one would expect the Christmastime holidays to end, but Puerto Ricans invented the *Octavitas*, which are eight more days of festivities because they do not want this family and community union season to end. The Calle San Sebastian Festival in San Juan (which is a Catholic festivity honoring John the Baptist) finally closes the season's festivities on January 20.

It is also important to highlight the celebration of *fiestas patronales* in each town (like county fairs in the U.S.) during different months of the year, which are dedicated to a Patron Saint brought by the Catholic Church and to whom the town's foundation is dedicated. This celebration takes place in the public squares of each city with entertainment for children and youth, artists, and the famous *Picas*, which is a carousel of horses made of wood meant for people to gamble on. Gambling and drinking on a Patron Saint's holiday is just one of the many contradictory idiosyncrasies which make up Puerto Rican culture. Another important celebration for Puerto Ricans is Holy Week, known commonly as Spring Break, in which the government and some private companies give the whole week off considering the Easter holiday.

In total, Puerto Rico has approximately 19 holidays, since they celebrate North American holidays such as President's Day, Veteran and Memorial Day, and even the Fourth of July, despite Puerto Rico not being a free country but rather an unincorporated territory with a complicated colonial status. Recent governmental changes aligning to the North American holiday calendar saw the elimination of several Puerto Rican holidays celebrating island-born statesmen and the consolidation of some local celebrations with North American ones.

Entertainment, Artists, and Sport Figures

Culturally speaking, Puerto Rico is well known for its great artists such as Jennifer López, Ricky Mart í, and Marc Anthony. Puerto Rico has created or greatly contributed to musical genres such as Salsa and, more recently, *reggaetón*. The island has also produced excellent sports figures, including baseball legend Roberto Clemente, boxer Tito Trinidad, tennis player Mónica Puig, and track and field athlete Beverly Ramos.

This cultural exchange of ideas, customs, traditions, festivities, food and music, and sports, which has characterized Puerto Rico and its inhabitants wherever they go, has been built over many centuries, each giving its input and forming and changing people's perspectives and values. Next, we describe how the culture in Puerto Rico today has influenced and has been influenced by confounding factors such as the longstanding financial crisis, natural disasters, and school closings on the island, all which impact schools and student enrollments, school environments, communities, and families.

2. Culture: Puerto Rico Today

Financial Crisis, Natural Disasters, and School Closings

On the morning of Wednesday, September 20, 2017, Hurricane Mar í struck Puerto Rico, severely damaging the island and "plunging all of its 3.4 million residents into a desperate humanitarian crisis" (Schwartz, 2018, para 1). Puerto Rico was already experiencing an overwhelming financial crisis (Walsh, 2017), which was further amplified by the hurricane. In May 2017, seeking reprieve from "the crushing weight of \$123 billion in debt and pension obligations, the island sought what is essentially bankruptcy relief in federal court" (Walsh, 2017, para 2). Compounding the situation, the Department of Education closed 167 schools in 2017, not including those that could not reopen after the impact of Hurricane Mar í. Puerto Rico closed 283 schools in the Summer of 2018, following a sharp drop in enrollment in the previous year, as reported by CNN (Chavez, 2018). Between 2014 and 2016, the agency closed 177 schools. In total, the number of closures between 2014 and 2018 was around 615 schools (Cordero-Mercado, 2019). According to Puerto Rico's Department of Education, schools lost

over 40,000 students because of the island's financial crisis and the devastation of Hurricane Mar ía (Chavez, 2018). In their report, the Fiscal Control Board imposed by the U.S. federal government recommended closing more schools and decreasing the number of teachers to pay the U.S. investors that control the debt in Puerto Rico. These crises impacted all areas of life on the island including the health, medical, and educational systems.

From 2017 to 2019, Puerto Rico's Department of Education was again heavily influenced by the U.S. through direct intervention of appointed Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who is affiliated with the Republican Party and is a native from Pennsylvania. It was soon evident that Keleher was not adequately fluent in the culture, Spanish language, historical context, literature, or values of the people of Puerto Rico. Secretary Keleher introduced a widely and heavily criticized strategy to close public schools, and funding for the local Education Department was cut down by 500 million dollars. In 2018, the Fiscal Control Board imposed by the U.S. government to oversee Puerto Rico's finances requested an additional \$200 million in cuts, including \$80 million dollars cut from special education.

Following Hurricane Mar ía, teachers and parents came together to repair schools and classrooms because the government response was slow and inefficient, and many families emigrated in the hurricane's aftermath, mostly to the U.S. (Instituto de Estad ística de Puerto Rico, 2018a). Many teachers were fired from their jobs, hundreds of schools were closed, and classrooms, including those for students with special needs, were overcrowded (Piette, 2018).

One month after Hurricane Mar ía, Secretary of Education Keleher tweeted that, "the islanders use the consequences of Hurricane Katrina as a point of reference" and an "opportunity to create new and better schools" (Piette, 2018). However, at the time of this writing, Keleher, now former Secretary of Education, had pleaded guilty in federal court to Judge Francisco Bebosa to two counts of conspiracy, after reaching an agreement with the federal prosecutor's Office. Specifically, Keleher agreed to plead guilty to two counts which were conspiracy to commit wire fraud and conspiracy to commit honest services fraud. As part of the agreement, the public ministry recommends a sentence of six months in jail and 12 months of home confinement. Similarly, it recommends that Keleher serve one year of supervised release and that she pays a fine of \$21,000 (Correa-Vel ázquez, 2021). She is not the first, or the last, person from former Governor Rossell ó's administration to be indicted at the federal level.

Under the weight of a seemingly endless financial crisis, multiple natural disasters, and governmental instability—schools and students in Puerto Rico have been adversely impacted. In fact, school closings and student enrollments have taken on an up-and-down fluctuating trend over the past two decades. During the 2003-2004 school year, there were 1,521 public and 562 licensed private schools in Puerto Rico with enrollments of about 650,326 and 145,114 students, respectively (Quintero, 2017). In the public-school system, there was a distribution of 272,719 students at the elementary level, 137,773 students at the intermediate level, and 114,598 students at the high school level (Quintero, 2017). However, for nearly two decades, there have been numerous public-school closings and significant declines in student enrollments (Rivera-Molina, 2021). During the recent 2020-2021 school year, there were 710 public schools (down 46.7% since school year 2003-04) and 627 licensed private schools (up since school 2002-04) in Puerto Rico with enrollments of about 263,861 and 108,178 students (down 40.6% and 74.5% since school year 2003-04), respectively (Departamento de Educaci ón Puerto Rico, 2022). In the public schools there were significant declines in enrollments with 158,633 students at the elementary level and 72,146 students at the intermediate and high school levels (Departamento de Educaci ón, 2022; Rivera-Molina, 2021).

However, according to the Puerto Rico Department of Education School District, there were 1,120 public schools serving 345,815 students in Puerto Rico for the 2022 school year (Public School Review, 2022). The student enrollment distribution was 107 pre-Kindergarten children, 912 elementary children, 385 middle school children and adolescents, and 241 high school adolescents (Public School Review, 2022). Further, the then newly appointed Secretary of Education (as of April 2019), Eligio Hern ández P érez, called for greater school stability and promised to reduce school inequalities by, in part: (a) allowing parents to select the school where they want their children to attend and not consider geographical area or distance, (b) continuing to provide free meals in school cafeterias, and (c) having counselors available through social workers in schools (Torres-Figueroa, 2019).

Families, Communities, and Poverty

Over the years, the level of poverty in children and young adults has been consistent, but it has recently reflected a tendency to grow from 56% to 58%. If we examine the poverty levels of Puerto Rico with those of the continental U.S., Puerto Rico has the largest poverty rate (almost twice) than the next worst-off state, Louisiana with 28%, followed by New Mexico at 27%. In the municipality of Maricao in Puerto Rico, the level of poverty can reach up to 84% (Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud, 2019). The child poverty level in Puerto Rico could continue to increase. According to the Instituto de Desarrollo de la Juventud (2019), low-income families were—and will continue to be—the most impacted after the hurricane. Moreover, some 40% of households with annual incomes of lower than \$15,000 indicated difficulties in paying for electricity and water, and difficulty purchasing food (38%), medicines (16.1%), and school supplies for their children (20.5%) (Instituto de Desarrollo de la Juventud, 2019).

Based on the Welfare Index, there has been a reduction (50% in 2012 to 47% in 2017) in the number of families with children where one or both parents are without a job, or out of the labor market (Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud, 2019). However, the median income in the families with children also reveals a tendency to decrease from \$20,459 to \$19,257, which would imply more, but less remunerated jobs (Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud, 2019).

Regarding families, the island also occupies first place regarding the largest number of households with children receiving assistance from the nutritional assistance program (PAN) with 44.7%, reflecting the economic vulnerability of Puerto Rican families who depend on this benefit. Along that same line, Puerto Rico obtained the highest percentage of minors living in single-parent households, with 62% (Instituto del Desarrollo de la Juventud, 2019).

Data for the 2019-2020 academic year reveals low enrollment and an increase in the level of poverty of the students in the public-school system of Puerto Rico. Of the 295 thousand students enrolled, 74% of these are headed by single mothers and/or grandparents with their children living below the poverty level (Torres-Figueroa, 2019).

Government, Law, and Debt

The people of Puerto Rico do not have enough political power to change their situation. Unlike Puerto Ricans living on the U.S. mainland, those who live in Puerto Rico do not have the right to vote to elect the President of the United States. Under the condition of Commonwealth, the island also has no seats in the Senate or in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. Because Puerto Rico is a U. S. colony, Congress treats it differently from the states in many respects (Felix & Soares, 2015). Nonetheless, Puerto Ricans pay the same tax for Medicare (1.45%) and Social Security (6.2%) as the rest of the U.S. population (Felix & Soares, 2015). Although Social Security pays equal to those who retire in Puerto Rico, on the island they do not receive supplemental security income (SSI) benefits, an additional program for low-income Americans in other parts of the nation (Felix & Soares, 2015). This inequality is seen in a very negative light on the island, as could be expected.

Puerto Rico was declared a "Commonwealth of United States" (ELA) in 1952, which means that decisions on financial, political, economic, defense, and migration issues are taken by the United States (Castor, 2017). Although the U.S. government does not consider Puerto Rico a colony, it is under its jurisdiction without really being an integral part of that country (teleSUR, 2019). Regarding the economy, Puerto Rico has been cataloged as "the economic colony of the USA" because a large part of businesses, if not all, are from the U.S., since competition is too great for national entrepreneurs to overcome them (teleSUR, 2019).

Hurricanes Irma and Mar á devastated Puerto Rico during September 2017, but a year earlier in 2016, a new chapter in the colonial history of Puerto Rico was written when U.S. President Barack Obama announced the *Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act* (PROMESA). More specifically, on Wednesday, June 29, 2016, the U.S. Senate passed a bill intended to address Puerto Rico's debt crisis. The next day (Thursday, June 30), President Barack Obama signed into law PROMESA, an Act established to take control of fiscal responsibility from the Puerto Rican government (Nwanevu, 2016). This was just a day before the Commonwealth's government would face

a \$1.9 billion-dollar default (Nwanevu, 2016).

PROMESA establishes an independent control board appointed by the President and the board has responsibility for managing Puerto Rico's spending and debt recovery, including plans for funding the island's public pensions. It also imposes a retroactive stay on litigation from the island's creditors against Puerto Rico's government and includes a provision that could lower Puerto Rico's minimum wage for workers 25 and younger below at the time federal minimum of \$7.25 hourly. PROMESA provides no federal funds for direct debt relief (Nwanevu, 2016).

In reaction to PROMESA's passing, the then-governor of Puerto Rico Alejandro Garc ía Padilla stated that "the bill would contribute to solving the territory's immediate debt problems but [he] expressed reservations about the bill's more controversial provisions, including the control board" (Nwanevu, 2016, para. 7). Further, the governor said, "It creates an oversight board that unnecessarily undercuts the democratic institution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico" (para 8). However, "facing the upsides and downsides of the bill, it gives Puerto Rico no true choice at this point in time" (Nwanevu, 2016, para. 8).

Essentially, PROMESA is a debt collection agency that respond to the big interests of Wall Street. Arguably, the former U.S. President Obama created a draconian Fiscal Control Board called the "Junta" (JCF) by some Puerto Ricans. The capabilities of the JCF consisted of stop hiring in any government agency and decreasing the base salary of employees in Puerto Rico of ages 25 years old or younger from \$ 7.25 to \$ 4.25 hourly. The JCF also enforced raised fines and tolls, in general, and added more taxes, while reducing the cities' economic aid and funding for sports, culture and arts, and programs that offer protection to female populations. Additional budget reductions by the JCF involved \$1 billion of medical care, a 10% reduction in pensions, a decrease in funding of more than \$600 million to Puerto Rico's university system budget and the closure of hundreds of schools under the directive of the now former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who was receiving an annual income of some \$250,000. Simultaneously, there were increased layoffs, repossessions on home loans and vehicle recoveries, cuts in basic services, and an increased cost of living, which have contributed to increased poverty and hunger in Puerto Rico since Hurricane Mar ía (Piette, 2018). Further with the excuse of "stimulating the economy," the *Labor Transformation and Flexibility Act*, passed in 2017, took from many employees hard-earned wages—while reducing wages, sick days and vacation days, and bonuses were minimized and probationary time for employees were prolonged (Piette, 2018).

Devastation of Hurricane Mar ía and Trump's Administration

The 2017 Atlantic Ocean hurricane season was extremely active. As stated previously, Puerto Rico receives most of the food and other vitally important articles from the United States, and most of these goods are shipped from Florida. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, which struck Texas on August 26, 2017, and Florida on September 10, 2017, respectively, created a crisis on the Eastern seaboard, as authorities rushed to send aid. Hurricanes Irma and Mar ía also caused widespread devastation to most, if not all, Caribbean islands. With closed seaports and airports and no goods coming in, Puerto Ricans faced an emergency like never. Other countries attempted to help, but jurisdictional measures like the *Jones Act* prevented them from doing so. On the one hand, the Jones Act, which was originally passed into law in 1917, eliminated legal barriers to migration; as such Puerto Ricans were now free to travel and settle anywhere in the U.S. or its territories. On the other hand, the Jones Act of 1920, stipulates that all goods shipped between U.S. ports be transported by U.S. ships, with U.S. crews. The Law has been amended several times, and in 2017, after Hurricane Harvey, U.S. President Trump approved a short-term waiver because of how severely affected some Texas ports were, which created a fuel shortage since Texas is a crucial oil transport hub. However, this waiver expired before Hurricane Mar ía made landfall. This was one of the many obstacles faced by Puerto Rico in the days after the hurricane (Carey, 2020).

President Trump alleged that Puerto Rico had received \$91 billion in assistance to mitigate the disaster caused by Hurricane Mar ía. When reviewing the data provided by the authorities of the U.S. and Puerto Rico, with the objective of verifying the most recent positions of government officials, the analysis made by Puerto Rican newspaper *El Nuevo D ía* maintains that the funds allocated to address the emergency, recovery, and reconstruction process are around \$45,700 million. The disbursements,

including the money destined by the federal government for the restoration of electric service, loans, and Medicaid funds that have softened the fiscal crisis of the government, are close to \$20,000 million. The former governor of Puerto Rico Ricardo Rosselló claimed that Puerto Rico has been unable to use most of the money allocated by Congress (Delgado, 2019a).

It is worth mentioning that, in the federal government, there is no site where the breakdown of allocations and disbursements made to Puerto Rico regarding Hurricane Mar ía can be known. Although former Governor Rosselló Nevaes insisted that the "most transparent reconstruction" is underway after a natural disaster, the Central Office for Recovery, Reconstruction and Resilience website (COR3) allows partial knowledge of the promised allocations and disbursements that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has supposedly granted. The Department of the Treasury also has not informed - although the information has been requested - how much money related to federal assistance for the Hurricane Mar ía disaster has entered the treasury. In a White House document published by *El Nuevo Día* in April 2019, the Trump administration also asserted that Congress had allocated enough money already for the recovery effort of Puerto Rico (Delgado, 2019b), which suggests that the rest of the money would come from reconstruction projects authorized by FEMA. Despite President Trump's evasiveness about new allocations of funds related to the recovery or reconstruction of Puerto Rico, nearly two years after the devastation of Hurricane Mar ía most of Puerto Rico's municipalities had still not received reimbursement of millions of dollars earmarked by FEMA for the recovery efforts post-Hurricane Mar ía (Rosario, 2019).

3. Conclusions and Final Comments

Puerto Rico's history is dynamic—characterized by colonial rule for centuries by Spain and now the United States—and its culture is unique and multidimensional characterized by a variety of foods, friends and families sharing love and support, fashionable styles and colors, and festivities and celebrations as well as dance (e.g., Salsa) and musical genres (*reggaetón*) often highlighting the drum, guitar, and percussion instruments as the people of Puerto Rico share their cultural expressions. On the other hand, historically and contemporarily the people of Puerto Rico have faced many challenges (e.g., economic constraints, governmental scandals and corruption, school closings, poverty, job insecurities, natural disasters), but have shown the power of resilience. In the second paper—in this two-part series, we explore and describe the resilience of physical education teachers as well as explore and describe cultural impacts on teachers coping with stress associated with teaching post-Hurricane Mar ía.

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Endnotes

1. Culture is a collection of interactions and expressions with the environment that make that geographic area and/or group of individuals different from the rest of the world (Rivera, 2019). Succinctly stated, culture is comprised of beliefs, values, behaviors, linguistic semantics, language and communication styles, practices, and traditions. In short, culture denotes common ways of life. Culture is generally linked to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, social positioning, and family histories (Hodge et al., 2007). This means culture includes broad social communities (Brewer & Yuki, 2007) for both acquaintances and strangers of a particular culture and they may share the same group affiliations and/or social identities.
2. On April 2, 1900, U.S. President McKinley signed a civil law that established a civilian government in Puerto Rico. This law was known as the Foraker Act for its sponsor, Joseph Benson Foraker (an Ohio statesman), and as the Organic Act of 1900. In addition, all federal laws of the United States were to be in effect on the island. The first civil governor of the island under the Foraker Act was Charles H. Allen, inaugurated on May 1, 1900 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. (Library of Congress, n.d., para 1)
3. Aida Negron de Montilla (1975) asserted “that the process of Americanization of Puerto Rico was initiated with the American invasion and occupation of the Island.” Further, she defined Americanization as “the process by which people of alien culture acquire American ways, standards of living, and national allegiance; of the assimilation of American culture by people of foreign birth or heritage” (p. ix).