U.S. Americanization in Puerto Rico's Public Schools: Proposing Children's Self-Organization for Decoloniality Through Photovoice and Philosophy for/with Children

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Abstract: The literature on U.S. Americanization in Puerto Rico's public schools suggests that *de jure* U.S. Americanization culminated in 1949 when an administrative order made Spanish the official language of instruction. However, the same literature seems to indicate that students continue to experience the impacts of U.S. Americanization because there has been limited systematic political intentionality to decolonize the educational system. In this article, I argue that to carry out a decolonizing process in the public schools of the archipelago, it will be necessary to engage in critical dialogues with students, listen to how they view their colonial reality, and push their thoughts to new spaces. To do this, I propose that educators use the photovoice methodology with children to see how they see and read their world. In addition, educators should practice philosophy for and with children (P4wC) so that children use the images they take as stimuli for communities of inquiry. In conclusion, I will demonstrate that the combination of photovoice and P4wC can be conducive to critically listen and attend to the voice and the gaze of children and begin to develop educational tools that allow children to critically respond on their own to the demands of their social and political context. In this way, the Americanization of Puerto Rico's public schools could be addressed by children's voices, visions, philosophies, and will for social change.

Introduction

In 1900, two years after the United States invaded and occupied the Puerto Rican archipelago, the Department of Public Instruction and the position of Commissioner of Instruction were created as part of the U.S. Americanization program (Helvia Quintero, 2023). U.S. Americanization in Puerto Rico's public schools consisted of the intention to displace and assimilate the native Puerto Rican culture by the U.S. one, create and maintain the superiority of U.S. cultural values and the inferiority of Puerto Ricans, and generate support and loyalty to the U.S. (Negrón de Montilla, 1976; del Moral, 2013). The leadership of the commissioners of Public Instruction from 1900-1930 used their political-administrative power to draft a series of circular letters that created and interweaved official pro-U.S.-Americanization educational policies that affected the entire public school system.

During this period, Puerto Rico had seven commissioners. Although not all the criteria they used to Americanize were the same, the educational policies that each of them created while they were commissioners are a guide to how the U.S. Americanization of the archipelago was implemented.

Among the various criteria applied by the circular letters are as follows: 1) celebrate typical U.S. national holidays that were not celebrated in Puerto Rico prior to the U.S. invasion; 2) organize and carry out U.S. patriotic exercises such as showing loyalty and emulation to the U.S. nation, symbols, and heroes; 3) transplant U.S. curricula into Puerto Rican school courses; 4) substitute local textbooks for U.S. ones; 5) adopt the organizational structure of the U.S. school system and the prevailing U.S. school policies; 6) employ U.S. teachers in place of Puerto Rican ones; 7) introduce U.S. student organizations, such as the Boys Scouts of America and others, that promote loyalty to the U.S.; 8) expel from the school system students or teachers found to be engaged in what the Department of Instruction considers to be anti-American, anti-assimilationist, and pro-independence sentiments and activities; and 9) substitute the vernacular as the language of instruction (Negrón de Montilla, 1976, pp. 9-10). The effects of these circular letters sustained *de jure* U.S. Americanization until 1949, when the Commissioner of Public Instruction, Mr. Mariano Villaronga Toro, issued Circular Letter Number 10, which established that teaching at all levels of the public school system would be in Spanish and that English would be offered as an additional subject (Barreto, 2020; Fullana Acosta, 2010). Hence, English became a compulsory school subject from the first years of primary school until university graduation (Pousada, 2010, p. 1).

Instead of reversing the previous U.S. Americanization process, Circular Letter Number 10 reaffirmed the use of Spanish as the dominant and culturally appropriate language for conducting education in Puerto Rico. Despite being a crucial decision that rejects a fundamental part of the U.S. Americanization process, the measure taken by Mr. Mariano Villaronga Toro was insufficient to decolonize the archipelago's public education system, because U.S. Americanization in Puerto Rico was, and continues to be, nourished by U.S. colonialism, and even more so by coloniality.

In this paper, I propose that children can be participants in the process of decoloniality of Puerto Rico, which more than being a political independence for the archipelago, will involve introducing a new perspective, starting from the children and in turn move us towards a new stage beyond coloniality. I will argue that photography through photovoice and collaborative and critical dialogue through philosophy for and with children (P4wC) can be conducive for children to develop their spirit of activism and in turn act as if they have the right to be agents of change and decolonial transformation. Finally, I will propose that a true decoloniality of the educational system in Puerto Rico must come from the very action of children, and an action that promotes their voices and a new perspective of reality that in turn reconstitutes their ways of thinking and imagining reality.

To support the above assertions, this paper is separated into three main sections: 1. Colonial State of Exception, Coloniality & Decoloniality; 2. Towards Decoloniality of and from Children: Photovoice & P4wC; and 3. Children's Self-Organization and the Right to Look.

1. Colonial State of Exception, Coloniality & Decoloniality

Three years after Circular Letter Number 10, Puerto Rico established the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Commonwealth). Atiles Osoria (2016) explains that with the "new" political state, Puerto Rican politics is constituted by a system of local political and legal organization that grants Puerto Ricans a certain degree of internal democracy and a republican, democratic, and liberal system of governance.

However, the democracy and governance system in Puerto Rico only maintains a certain internal degree of functionality since on the one hand, the *Estado Libre Asociado* grants Puerto Rico legal, economic, and political powers that distance it from classical colonialism, while on the other hand, it does not deliver sovereignty to the Puerto Rican people and their public institutions (Atiles Osoria, 2016, p. 20). Thus, the political-legal bases on which the constitution of Puerto Rico lies is a "colonial state of exception" (Atiles, 2016) in which the United States is the sovereign that has the plenary power to pause the constitution at any time to exercise the power to legislate over Puerto Rico. In short, if Puerto Rico remains a colony, the U.S. Congress will always have the power to legislate politically and legally over the archipelago.

Although Puerto Rico's independence could resolve the colonial state of exception, the effects of U.S. colonialism would not end overnight because they have created a dominant worldview or ideology that, as Negrón de Montilla (1976) and del Moral (2013) assert, have produced and maintained a sense of U.S. American superiority embedded in the forms of knowledge (epistemologies) and ways of being (ontologies) practiced in Puerto Rican education. Certainly, U.S. colonialism is not the only challenge facing a Puerto Rican liberation and transformation process since it operates as part of coloniality/modernity, which has generated an epistemic and ontological imaginary that cannot be thought of outside the Eurocentric perspective.

Coloniality/modernity is constitutive of the 1492 colonization of the Americas. Aníbal Quijano (2000) introduces the term coloniality to explain how the first world-system with Europe at the center, founded on colonialism, racism, and capitalism, has more lasting and interlocking effects than the transitory process of colonialism itself. In this same process coloniality arises, which consists in the constitutive element of modernity, in which Eurocentrism dominates the way we perceive, live, and understand reality as a whole; including the commonly overlooked intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Lugones, 2008). In this way, it is or seems almost impossible to imagine a world outside coloniality, since the knowledge of the colonized nations has been subjugated, thus creating a primacy of Eurocentric knowledge.

Since all the Americas have been affected by modernity/coloniality, Puerto Rico is no exception. Thus, more than thinking about the *independence* of Puerto Rico, it is necessary to reflect about the *decoloniality* of this, which should reconstitute the ways of thinking and imagining of Puerto Ricans. In the face of coloniality, Mignolo and Walsh (2018) propose to decolonize through the reconstitution of the epistemologies and ontologies of nations beyond the structures of knowledge and being created by modernity. This project seeks to reconstitute the epistemologies and ontologies of all people struggling from and within the borders and cracks of coloniality/modernity, to build a radically different world (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 5). In this way, decoloniality is not the independence of nation-states, but consists of a path, an option, a point of view, an analytic, a project, a practice, and a praxis that seeks to end, and move beyond, coloniality/modernity (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 4).

Dussel (1993) asserts that although modernity has been understood as a purely European phenomenon, modernity cannot exist without the "periphery," that is, the countries, communities, and nations excluded and assimilated by Eurocentrism (p. 65). Thus, modernity includes an emancipatory Eurocentric rationality and scientific and technological advances while including an

"irrational myth, a justification of genocidal violence" (Mignolo, 2010, p. 18). From this irrational myth, the genocidal violence of colonialism was justified, and the "premodern/modern" and "savage/civilized" binaries were founded (Rollo, 2018).

This irrational myth is a constitutive element of Eurocentric rationality from which the notion of progress of civilization starts from a premodern and savage state of childhood. Rollo (2018), argues that "In the Western teleological account of reason, the mechanisms of development from, on the one hand, child to adult, and, on the other hand, from premodern to modern, are fully homologous" (p. 4). For this reason, from the myth of modernity, children like the indigenous people were considered "premodern" and "savage." From the settler colonial framework, then, children and indigenous people had a moral obligation to submit to the "superiority" of the settlers, who were charged with overseeing the transition from an "inferior" and "subordinate" state of being to a "mature" state of being. From that maturity, however, the colonized people did not cease to be inferior to the colonists but ended up assimilating into the colonists' imaginary and mind.

2. Towards Decoloniality of and from Children: Photovoice & P4wC

The justification of violence and oppression of coloniality/modernity continues to serve as a model for the exclusion and domination of children. In the context of education, for example, Freire (2005) recognizes that a "banking education" subjugates the child, because it prevents them from developing their curiosity and social consciousness (*conscientização*) that can allow them to be managers and provocateurs of the transformation of their reality. Hence, in the field of education, we move from the binary "savage/civilized" to the binary "student/teacher;" without losing sight of the fact that both binaries are homologous.

Freire (2005) claims that "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 72). Faced with this scenario, Freire (2005) proposes a "problem-posing education," an education that breaks with the student/teacher binary, or as he calls it "student-teacher contradiction," allowing students to be co-educators and co-investigators together with the teacher by critically examining their reality. That is, the student appears as a bearer and giver of knowledge, thus breaking the vertical pattern of student-teacher contradiction. In problem-posing education, then, both the teacher and the student are carriers and givers of knowledge, which allows the educational dynamic in the classroom, for example, to be anti-authoritarian and communitarian. In this way, a process of liberation begins, which like decoloniality, allows the decolonizing of the mind and the imaginary of the children, thus reconstituting the epistemologies and ontologies of the people who live from and within the borders and cracks of coloniality/modernity.

2.1. Photovoice

Problem-posing education provides the basis for methodologies such as photovoice to enable children to see the world with critical consciousness. Wang and Burris (1997) developed the photovoice methodology as a "process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (p. 369). Through photovoice, participants are

provided with photographic equipment and asked to photograph a specific aspect of their lives. By means of this exercise it is possible to capture images that foster a critical dialogue that reflects the knowledge and reality of a community and its individuals. In addition, since this type of methodology is participatory, it allows the people involved to discuss problems and solutions that stimulate social action. In short, the photovoice methodology combines photography, dialogue, and individual, family, and community knowledge as a catalyst to identify problems, find community solutions, and bring about social change.

Along with Freire's (2005) theoretical framework of critical consciousness, photovoice draws on two theoretical frameworks: feminist theory and documentary photography (Sutton-Brown, 2014, p. 170). On the one hand, feminist theory allows photovoice to identify, name, and address social injustices such as unequal gendered relationships. On the other hand, documentary photography uses critical consciousness and feminist theory to capture moments of everyday life that foster critical dialogues about reality. These critical dialogues can be narratives, stories, or histories that explain the photographs taken, and the emotions, experiences, and social consciousness behind them.

Besides the three theoretical frameworks, it has also been proposed to introduce an anticolonial theoretical framework to the photovoice methodology. Fricas (2022) considers that one must be particularly critical to prevent photovoice from being used in an ahistorical manner when working with diverse communities, especially indigenous peoples. For this reason, Fricas (2022) proposes an anticolonial methodology for photovoice that recognizes three pillars of ongoing oppression: genocide/colonialism, racism/slavery, and Orientalism/war (p. 2). By anticolonial methodology, Fricas (2022) refers to a methodology that allows theorizing and countering coloniality through the knowledge and ways of being and existing of indigenous communities and peoples. In this way, the photovoice could be even more intentional in not perpetuating the dynamics of colonial oppression, control, and domination.

That anti-colonial theoretical framework would also serve to intentionally and explicitly prevent photovoice from being used within the child/adult binary. Indeed, photovoice breaks out of that binary by practicing rapport between children and the photographs taken, giving children space to feel at liberty to take photographs and confident to speak with agency about the images taken (Johnson, Pfister, & Vindrola-Pardos, 2012, p. 166). However, to decolonize through photovoice is not enough to highlight issues of power, but one must be intentional in resisting coloniality and moving beyond it. Fricas' (2022) anticolonial theoretical framework moves beyond coloniality in that it takes into account the diverse epistemological origins of the participants' experiences and explanations; allows for flexible, fluid, and transparent language and discussions; interrogates configurations of power/privilege and/or their structural underpinnings; examines (or allows examination of) the indigeneity, agency, resistance, and/or politics of co-researchers; accommodates local knowledge and practices; enables representations of the collective consciousness, not just the individual; and encourages researchers and participants to be aware of the history of the structures in which they operate (pp. 11-12).

This theoretical framework could contribute to stimuli and critical dialogues, which can be implemented along with the P4wC program as a complement to the task of decolonizing public

schools in Puerto Rico. In this way, children would create their own stimuli through the images they take and would lay the groundwork for critical and creative questions and dialogues that lead to imagination and thinking beyond coloniality. Furthermore, this would make it feasible to conceive the collaboration between photovoice and P4wC as a decolonizing act of and from the children themselves.

2.2. P4wC

Lipman (1976) introduced the Philosophy for Children program (also known as P4wC) to enable the child to discover and harness the qualities of their thinking and motivate reasoning about important issues even if they do no more than ask basic and fundamental questions (p. 19). To discover and benefit from critical reasoning, P4wC uses inquiry, which Lipman (1976) understood as a communal activity (p. 23). For this reason, philosophical activities in P4wC take place in communities of inquiry through which students choose a question that leads to philosophical inquiry, learn communally the reasonableness of the question, judge whether the question is relevant or applies to the action or opinion in question, identify which reasonings are best and which are not, and maintain a collective evaluative mindset toward all reasoning brought to discussion (Lipman, 1977, p. 126-128). Ultimately, the purpose of the community of inquiry is to foster a shared dialogue that is helpful in promoting critical and logical reasoning and thinking.

As Fitzpatrick and Reed-Sandoval (2018) state, P4wC maintains a model of discussion and teaching that is almost exclusively "bottom-up," since it starts from the children (p.112). It is through this model that educators not only do not impose their way of thinking but allow themselves to be surprised by the philosophical questions that emanate from students' life experiences and reasoning. For this reason, facilitators of communities of inquiry should guide the discourse in the classroom by choosing a topic or an initial question that immerses the students in critical community dialogues (Fitzpatrick & Reed-Sandoval, 2018, p. 113). Rather than being a mere neutral observer, facilitators must listen carefully to see what children have to say and from that stimulate their thoughts to new spaces through questions such as why.

Reed-Sandoval (2019) proposes that P4wC can be conducive to decolonize because communities of inquiry allow children to ask new and novel questions unchallenged by adults and empower children, epistemically marginalized agents under authoritarian educational models (p. 32). However, as Reed-Sandoval (2019) rightly notes, decoloniality is not a practice that always emerges organically. Since decoloniality is charged with reconstituting epistemologies and ontologies rejected and ignored by modernity, colonialism, the modern world-system, and capitalism—and these four as aspects of the same simultaneous and mutually constitutive reality (Dussel, 2016, p. 41)—it takes facilitators of communities of inquiry to be intentional about foregrounding reasoning and curiosity about these questions. Otherwise, issues of race and racism, for example, will be neglected by children because these issues do not always arise organically in contexts where the white majority is protected and privileged (Rainville, 2001).

In "From Neutrality to Intentionality: Notes for a Philosophy of Liberation for/with Children," (2023) I propose that P4wC can be a philosophy of liberation if it intends to understand and address

the original sin (or irrational myth) of modernity from and with children. It is in this intentional exercise that children will be allowed to question, imagine, and explore the ethical, political, social, and aesthetic dimensions of human experience, giving themselves and the people altered by coloniality/modernity, epistemic, and ontological privilege.

In P4wC curricula, children are provided with stimuli to analyze, explore, and recreate concepts related to philosophical issues and problems (ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, logical, existential, etc.) (Lipman, 1988). But what if it were the children who created some of the philosophical stimuli? Certainly, the collaboration between the photovoice methodology and the P4wC program introduces the photographs taken by the children as stimuli for identifying philosophical problems, producing community reflective outcomes, and fostering decoloniality. The photographs can be used to create curricular and co-curricular programs in which the photographs stimulate questions and dialogues that promote the liberating action of *naming the world, to change it* (Freire, 2005, p. 88). Children would thus become co-creators together with other children and adults, and would present new ways of analyzing, exploring, and recreating reality through photographs; an exercise especially relevant in colonial, authoritarian, and socially unjust environments.

3. Children's Self-Organization and the Right to Look

In the context of the colonial state of exception in Puerto Rico, it becomes more critical that children collaborate with decoloniality. Educators must also participate, accompanying the children as they develop their "spirit of activism." This spirit is a sense of justice motivated by an awareness of current injustices (Wheeler-Bell, 2014, p. 464). The child who embodies it does not focus merely on their individual well-being but promotes the human flourishing of the collective. As Wheeler-Bell (2014) states, "the spirit of activism moves beyond the private realm, by connecting one's sense of justice to collective processes aimed at radical social change" (p. 480).

The use of decolonial photovoice and P4wC is conducive to developing this spirit. Children will be able to dialogue about issues central to the common good, while practicing the exercise of looking critically at their world and reality. Children's critical gaze is fundamental, because global capital maintains an imperial sovereignty that it has developed through military, political, and social control of visible and invisible communications (Mirzoeff, 2006). Through this control—or, as Mirzoeff (2006) calls it, "visuality"—empires have created new subjectivities, accustomed to tolerating or even accepting little or no right to information. Moreover, other subjectivities have been created, always abject, which, as happens under coloniality/modernity, cannot be imagined and thought outside or beyond their current reality. Hence the undeniable importance of countering visuality through the "right to look."

That looking as if one has the right to do so is powerful because as Mirzoeff (2006) argues, even if there is no proper emancipation or end to war, practicing the right to look "might open the means to creating a politics around such practices, rather than submitting to the counterclaim that what is seen is simply the domain of the police" (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 40). In this way, emancipation is neither a law nor a static policy, but a constant practice that does not depend on the system, nor on the government.

Mirzoeff (2006) argues that the right to look consists in looking as if one has the right to look precisely because under the current system of military, political, and social control one does not. It is to look *as if* because under the total control of global capital there is no proper emancipation of citizens, but a permanent mode of war, whereby empires control what can be seen and what cannot.

Certainly, children can exercise this right to look through exercises such as photovoice. In fact, when children do so, they are practicing a kind of "countervisuality." They performatively claim their autonomy, through their critical and communitarian gaze that reconstructs and reimagines their subjectivities and political collectivities precisely where they do not exist. Even more, countervisuality is key to practicing decoloniality, as it "is not just a different way of seeing or a different way of looking at images but the tactics to dismantle the visual strategies of the hegemonic system" (Baetens, 2013, p. 95). In Mirzoeff's (2011) words, countervisuality is "the attempt to reconfigure visuality as a whole" (p. 24). Therefore, as well as decoloniality, countervisuality seeks to reconstitute the different ways of seeing, existing, and imagining reality ignored and excluded by the hegemonic system.

In the case of photovoice and P4wC, the first step in moving beyond coloniality/modernity must include children exercising their right to look even when under coloniality/modernity they do not have that right. In the case of Puerto Rico, children can exercise their right to look not only to contribute to the process of decoloniality, but to present a countervisuality and a counterargument to the ways of seeing, being, and living imposed by the hegemony of U.S. Americanization, constitutive of coloniality. In this way, the right to look, along with the spirit of activism, can reconstitute children's epistemologies and ontologies and, at the same time, dismantle the visual, epistemic, and ontological strategies of the hegemonic system.

Final Remarks

The right to look and the spirit of activism can be cultivated from photovoice and P4wC. It is in the collaboration of these distinct but reinforcing theoretical and educational frameworks that children can organize and maintain critical and decolonial dialogues about the photographs they have taken. With facilitators and educators inviting children to investigate and read the world critically, children would be able to develop their spirit of activism and self-organize to live decoloniality.

The end of modernity/coloniality occurs in "transmodernity." According to Dussel (2016), transmodernity consists of a radical novelty that starts from the "always different" of the periphery, which disrupts coloniality/modernity itself (p. 45). This "always different" is invaluable because it takes on the challenges of coloniality/modernity to respond in another way. Indeed, children, through photovoice and P4wC, can be the "always different" who surprise the mind and imagination of adults in the attempt to reconfigure the ways of thinking, being, seeing, and imagining excluded and ignored by coloniality/modernity.

In Puerto Rico, U.S. Americanization did not end with Circular Letter Number 10, because U.S. Americanization, like coloniality/modernity, cannot be overcome with the application of a single technical solution. In fact, of the nine U.S. Americanization criteria presented at the beginning of this

article, six are still in force in one form or another: 1) typical U.S. national holidays that were not celebrated in Puerto Rico prior to the invasion are still celebrated today, such as Presidents' Day, Citizenship Day, and Independence Day (Cámara de Comercio de Puerto Rico, 2023); 2) U.S. patriotic exercises such as singing the U.S. national anthem at official school activities (i.e., graduation ceremony) are still carried out and the U.S. flag is still flown on the grounds of public schools; 3) the implementation of some elements of the U.S. curricula into Puerto Rican school courses is still practiced; 4) in subjects such as English, U.S. educational material (novels, movies, textbooks, etc.) continues to be preferred over material culturally relevant to the local and Caribbean reality; 5) there is still an attempt to transplant part of the organizational structure of the U.S. school system and the prevailing school policies in the U.S., especially for the creation of charter schools, the Free School Selection Program, and the Initiative for Decentralization of Education and Autonomy of Regions (IDEAR); and 6) there are still U.S. student organizations, such as the Boys Scouts of America and others, that promote loyalty to the United States.

In Puerto Rico, there are no longer legal attempts to employ U.S. teachers instead of Puerto Ricans; expel from the school system students or teachers involved in what the Department of Education considers anti-American, anti-assimilationist, and pro-independence sentiments and activities; and substitute the vernacular as the language of instruction. Moreover, 125 years after the U.S. invasion, Puerto Ricans have not lost their strong national, linguistic, and cultural identity, for example. However, decoloniality as a path, an option, a point of view, an analytic, a project, a practice, and a praxis requires a constant endeavor to reconstitute Puerto Rican ways of thinking, imagining, dreaming, and being. It is more than anything else an explicit, adaptive, and proactive attempt to move beyond Eurocentrism, and the U.S.-centrism that continues to perpetuate the *de facto* U.S. Americanization process in Puerto Rico's public education system.

For this reason, the proposal on photovoice and P4wC that I make in this paper should not be implemented as a technical solution. Indeed, I do not claim that the proposal will immediately lead us to transmodernity. However, I believe the collaboration between photovoice and P4wC is another component in the constant and diverse efforts to decolonize. These efforts must include and emanate from the children themselves. Only if their capacities to see, think, and imagine are taken seriously, will it be possible to recognize that children must be part of the transformative and liberating process of decoloniality.

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