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Panelists Say U.S. Colonial Educational System is Diminishing Self-Identity of Territorial Citizens

Panelists from U.S. territories, including the USVI, Puerto Rico, and Guam, discuss challenges in education, highlighting issues such as outdated infrastructure, curriculum misalignment, and the impact of poverty

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Panelists from several U.S. territories gathered in the U.S. Virgin Islands on Wednesday to discuss challenges in education and efforts to address them, all through the lens of the territories' colonial relationship with the United States. The discussion was a collaborative effort between Right to Democracy, the Radical Education & Advocacy League, and local public broadcaster WTJX.

Jessica Samuel, co-founder of the Radical Education and Advocacy League in the USVI, described the "three main buckets" of issues facing education in the territory: infrastructure, curriculum, and quality of life. She noted that bureaucratic barriers exist due to the "cumbersome nature" of the territory's relationship with the federal government, and highlighted how the 2017 hurricanes left dilapidated and ruined educational infrastructure behind, some of which students are still forced to utilize seven years onwards.

While the Department of Education and other agencies are working to resolve infrastructural problems, Ms. Samuel argues that similar attention needs to be paid to tailoring the curriculum to reflect Virgin Islands history and culture. Despite [legislative attempts](#) to ensure that these topics are covered in the territory's public schools, Ms. Samuel said that currently, the curriculum "doesn't reflect our local heritage." The disconnect, she believes, is "a response to our colonial predicament."

The impact of poverty on educational achievement is also a major factor. "There's a direct correlation between poverty and student's ability to really access a quality education," Ms. Samuel explained. With a third of children in the USVI [falling below the poverty line](#), their ability to "show up in the classrooms and be able to learn and retain information" is significantly impacted, Ms. Samuel noted.

Puerto Rico's representative, Georgina Candal-Segurola, president of the island commonwealth's Civil Rights Commission, added another wrinkle – the corruption of public officials. She noted that two former secretaries of education had been jailed for embezzlement of public funds, and another high-ranking education official currently under investigation for allegedly improperly granting awards to political associates. "There is a lack of oversight and interest that the U.S. Department of Education demonstrates in Puerto Rico," she asserted. "They have known for many years about the poor conditions of our education."

However, even when the federal agency attempts to address territorial issues, local forces sometimes step in to derail things. An initiative begun last year by the U.S. Department of Education to decentralize the Puerto Rico Department of Education, in an attempt to depoliticize the body. But the effort failed because according to Ms. Candal-Segurola, local authorities have been sabotaging the effort by refusing to provide information to the volunteers attempting to advise on the project, causing many to quit.

The panelists from Guam and other jurisdictions generally agreed, adding that the curriculum, because it emanates from the U.S. Department of Education, is very U.S.-centric. "Our people know more about the United States than they do about ourselves, even our nearby sisters and brothers in the Northern Mariana Islands," said Leila Staffler, secretary of Labor in NMI. "We name the 50 states and capitals but we often struggle even to name the villages in our island." The colonial education stamped onto the minds of young Northern Mariana Islanders renders them "ignorant of who we are and where we come from, which is directly connected to the...continued maintenance of this kind of political status quo, which is an unincorporated territory of the United States," Ms. Staffler argued, highlighting one of the fundamental ways education is intrinsically intertwined with people's self-conception and self-expression.

Instruction in those jurisdictions is in English rather than the native language, something that really "hits the heart," according to Donna L. Enguerra-Simpson, the panelist from American Samoa. That was attempted as well in Puerto Rico, said Ms. Candal-Segurola, but that effort ultimately failed because Spanish was already so entrenched, and was used as a means of resistance by the population.

To address these three “buckets” of issues facing education in American territories, Ms. Samuel highlighted the need for territories to critically appraise the legislative framework surrounding education.

“That might seem a bit counterintuitive, but currently we have a lot of bills and a lot of acts that are on record that pertain to education,” she noted. “Some of them are actually overlapping in terms of their objectives, or they've been sitting or they have not been revisited.”

Over the years, a hodgepodge of statute has been built up, Ms. Samuel said, causing some amount of confusion and opacity regarding what it actually meant to be happening. A clear policy approach that builds on the initiatives of past administrations, that is always being fine tuned and re-aligned with current best practice, would allow the Virgin Islands to “really extract the best of what we offer in terms of solutions,” Ms. Samuel said.