



Shaping Minds and Culture: The Cultural Impact of the American Educational System on Filipinos, 1902-1946

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Abstract

The American colonization of the Philippines lasted for nearly half a century, from 1898 to 1946. As a colonial power, the United States sought to implement policies that would promote the social and material well-being of the Filipino people. Among the most significant legacies of American colonialism was the establishment of a public education system, which created a profound cultural impact on Filipino society during and after the colonial period. This educational initiative is often regarded as the greatest contribution of American rule. The American educational system introduced democratic ideals, English language instruction, and civic values. It aimed to make education free, accessible, and non-discriminatory, reaching Filipinos across different social classes. The spread of these cultural and educational values had a transformative effect on Filipino life, influencing not only individual aspirations but also national identity and collective development. The impact of this system remains evident in the present-day Philippine educational structure and cultural orientation.

This paper examines how American education shaped the lives and culture of the Filipino people. It explores the role of education in uplifting Filipinos materially, socially, and morally, and in preparing them to engage with broader societal and global affairs. The study presents a brief historical overview of the American educational system in the Philippines and offers a focused analysis of its influence in selected regions of Luzon, the Visayas, and parts of Mindanao. Utilizing both primary sources and secondary literature, the paper employs historical and archival research methods to address key questions, including: To what extent did native Filipino culture interact with and respond to the American educational system? What were the major challenges faced by American authorities in implementing their educational program? What factors motivated Filipinos to embrace American-style of education?

Through this inquiry, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the enduring legacy of American education in the Philippines and its complex role in shaping Filipino society.

Keywords: American Education, Cultural Values, Cultural Impact, American Colonization, 1902-1946

Introduction

The introduction of the American educational system in the Philippines had a profound and lasting impact on Filipino society. It significantly improved literacy rates and opened opportunities for social mobility, effectively challenging long-held perceptions of inferiority. American education played a central role in promoting cultural transformation—one of the fundamental objectives of U.S. colonial policy. A well-structured and directed educational system became one of the most powerful tools for uplifting the social conditions of Filipinos. The United States laid the foundation of modern Philippine education. The establishment of the Ministry of Education in 1901 marked the genesis of what is now known as the Department of Education. For nearly four decades, this system facilitated the assimilation of Filipinos into American culture and values,

shaping the country's identity in the context of a modernizing Southeast Asia.

It is worth noting that the concept of universal primary education was not introduced by the Americans. During the Spanish colonial period, the Education Decree of 1863 mandated the establishment of a nationwide system of education. However, despite this progressive policy, the reform failed to raise literacy levels significantly. Under Spanish rule, Filipinos were often regarded as "Indios"—ignorant and uneducated.

In contrast, the American regime brought a transformative approach to education. The system they implemented not only expanded access to schooling but also redefined the Filipino identity. It fostered economic progress among the working class or *gente baja*, and in a relatively short period, helped reshape Filipinos into what the Americans envisioned as enlightened and self-governing individuals. Through education and gradual autonomy, the United States aimed to mold the Philippines into a competitive and modern society within the Southeast Asian region.

This study explores the American impact on Philippine education from 1902 to 1946. Specifically, it aims to: (1) examine the cultural influence of the American educational system; (2) present a historical overview of the development of Philippine education and its role in social advancement; (3) identify the major challenges encountered in implementing the American system; and (4) analyze the responses of Filipinos to this educational initiative.

The significance of this study lies in several areas. First, it provides a framework for understanding how Americans addressed the challenges of introducing a new educational system. Second, it offers insights for readers seeking to comprehend the structure and intentions of American education in the Philippines. Third, it serves as a valuable reference for scholars exploring the rich historical landscape of the American colonial period. Fourth, it highlights how American education dramatically reshaped the lives of Filipinos. Finally, this study contributes to Philippine historiography by supplementing the existing literature on the development of education during the American era.

Methodology

This research is grounded in historical and archival analysis. The study integrates both primary and secondary sources, including scholarly articles, case studies, dissertations, books, journals, and archival documents. Digital platforms and internet-based repositories were utilized to access relevant materials. Data was thoroughly examined and analyzed to ensure the reliability and coherence of findings. This study is intended not only as a historical account but also as a potential springboard for future scholarly work on the subject.

This study focuses exclusively on the period from 1902 to 1946, which corresponds to the American colonial rule in the Philippines. It examines the implementation of the American educational system during this era—widely regarded as one of the most significant achievements of the United States in the archipelago. The availability of written documents and archival sources pertaining to this period enabled the researcher to concentrate on this timeframe and conduct a data-driven historical investigation to substantiate the study's key arguments. Although the researcher encountered time constraints, considerable effort was made to collect and analyze relevant materials that would validate the findings

and provide depth to the discussion. In order to contextualize the emergence of American educational policies, this study also briefly discusses the Spanish-era Education Decree of 1863. This historical background is included to place the study in proper perspective and provide foundational information necessary for addressing the research questions posed.

Results and Discussion

The establishment of the American colonial government in the Philippines led to the creation of a centralized Bureau of Education, which played a pivotal role in advancing the objectives of American educational policy. Among the various efforts undertaken by the Americans during their occupation, the development of a public education system proved to be one of the most successful and widely supported initiatives. It not only enhanced the literacy rate among Filipinos but also brought about both qualitative and quantitative changes in their way of life.

1. Cultural Transformations Through American Education

The American educational system served as a conduit for cultural transmission, profoundly influencing Filipino values, customs, and lifestyles. Through formal schooling, American ideals were introduced, absorbed, and internalized by generations of Filipino students. These changes were most apparent in several aspects of Filipino life:

1.1 Transformation of Filipino Way of Life, Language, and Beliefs

The education system reinforced American beliefs and customs through its curriculum, pedagogy, and school environment. Over time, cultural values such as individualism, consumerism, democracy, and freedom of expression were embedded in Filipino consciousness. The public school system became the primary vehicle through which these foreign ideals were disseminated, gradually transforming traditional Filipino norms and practices.

1.2 Cultural Values and Colonial Mentality

The American colonial period introduced many cultural values that are still evident in Filipino society today. Among these were the ideals of democracy, equality, and free speech—values that many Filipinos came to admire and aspire to. Education became a powerful instrument for promoting these values, shaping a new generation of citizens aligned with American worldviews.

However, this cultural influence was not without consequences. Alongside these values emerged a sense of cultural inferiority, often referred to as "colonial mentality." Many Filipinos began to view American products, lifestyles, and cultural standards as superior to their own. This led to a growing disconnection from indigenous practices and a tendency to favor foreign goods and ideas. Nationalist critics observed that Filipinos were adopting an identity increasingly shaped by American ideals, sometimes at the expense of their native traditions and cultural heritage.

1.3 Language and Linguistic Shift

One of the most significant cultural shifts under American rule was the widespread adoption of the English language. English was introduced as the medium of instruction in public schools through an act of the Philippine Commission, which

also mandated the establishment of a modern school system. The adoption of English was seen as essential for effective governance, communication, and modernization.

A report from the Philippine Commission outlined several key objectives regarding language policy:

1. The immediate implementation of a modern school system focused on elementary English instruction, with compulsory attendance where feasible;
2. The establishment of industrial and vocational schools once a basic level of English proficiency had been attained;
3. The use of English as the language of instruction in government schools, allowing local dialects only during the transition period;
4. The recruitment of trained American teachers (later known as *Thomasites*) to teach in larger towns;
5. The creation of a well-equipped normal school to train Filipinos as English-speaking teachers.

The use of English was intended to bridge communication gaps between the colonizers and the colonized, and to prevent misunderstandings rooted in linguistic diversity. Over time, English proficiency became associated with social mobility, prestige, and access to opportunity. The language became deeply embedded in Filipino society and remains one of the country's official languages to this day. Yet, this linguistic shift came with its own set of challenges. Filipino and local vernacular languages were largely sidelined in the educational system. Many students, especially in non-Tagalog regions, found themselves disadvantaged by a curriculum designed with American learners in mind. While the school system succeeded in unifying various ethnolinguistic groups under a common language, it also contributed to the marginalization of native languages and dialects in formal education.

Despite these challenges, American education helped produce a new class of educated Filipinos—whether Cebuano, Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicolano, Pampangan, or Igorot—who could engage with the broader national and global discourse through English. This development played a crucial role in shaping the modern Filipino identity and in the emergence of nationalist movements later in the 20th century.

2.1 Cultural Values

During the 45 years of American colonization, the United States introduced significant cultural changes that continue to shape Filipino society to this day. One of the primary goals of the American colonial government was the dissemination of its cultural values, particularly through education. Schools became the primary instrument for promoting ideals such as democracy, equality, and freedom of speech—values that many Filipinos came to admire and embrace.

Education under American rule served as both a civilizing and assimilative tool. By embedding American norms and ideals in the school curriculum, the colonial administration successfully instilled cultural values that transformed the Filipino worldview. English language instruction, along with the celebration of American holidays, democratic ideals, and individual achievement, helped promote a distinct cultural reorientation.

However, this cultural influence also came with negative consequences. Critics, particularly Filipino nationalists, have pointed to the rise of colonial mentality—a mindset in which

Filipinos began to perceive American culture, products, and values as inherently superior to their own. This mentality fostered a preference for imported goods, Western standards of beauty, and foreign lifestyles, often at the expense of local traditions and indigenous identity.

Materialism, as introduced and reinforced by American consumer culture, became a growing trait among Filipinos. The emphasis on material success and social mobility altered traditional communal values and reinforced the belief that progress was synonymous with Westernization. As a result, many Filipinos began to adopt a way of life that was increasingly detached from their native customs, languages, and beliefs. Thus, while American education played a key role in modernizing Filipino society and promoting civic ideals, it also facilitated a form of cultural displacement. Filipinos were not only educated in the ways of a new colonial power but were subtly encouraged to see themselves as part of an Americanized cultural order. This dual legacy of empowerment and alienation remains one of the most enduring effects of American rule in the Philippines.

2.2 Language

Under American colonial rule, English was not only introduced in Filipino schools—it was institutionalized as the primary medium of instruction throughout the public education system. This initiative was mandated by the Philippine Commission, which established the American public school system in the early 20th century. Over time, English was adopted by many Filipinos as the official language of education, government, and public discourse. Its widespread use marked one of the most enduring legacies of American colonial influence in the Philippines. The rationale behind this linguistic transformation was both practical and political. By promoting a common language, the colonial administration aimed to reduce misunderstandings and foster unity between the colonizers and the colonized. The belief was that a shared language would ease governance and facilitate the assimilation of Filipinos into the ideals and practices of American democratic society.

The long-term impact of this policy is undeniable. English became deeply entrenched in Filipino culture and institutions. It not only became a tool of communication but also a marker of social mobility and educational advancement. Mastery of the language opened doors to government employment, higher education, and access to global ideas. In this sense, English was equated with power and progress.

However, this transformation also came with drawbacks. Filipino and regional languages were marginalized in formal education. Many students, especially in rural or non-Tagalog-speaking regions, found the English-centered curriculum alienating and difficult to grasp. The educational materials and systems were originally designed for American students, often disregarding the cultural and linguistic realities of Filipino learners. Despite these challenges, the English-based education system succeeded in producing a new educated class composed of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds—Cebuano, Tagalog, Ilocano, Bicolano, Pampanga, Igorot, and others—who shared a common language and could engage in national discourse. While the dominance of English contributed to a more unified national identity, it also contributed to the ongoing tension between linguistic modernity and cultural preservation in the Philippines.

2.3 Filipino's Cultural Reorientation

The transfer of colonial authority from Spain to the United States further deepened the cultural alienation brought about by centuries of colonization. While American rule promoted itself under the guise of *benevolent assimilation*—a policy meant to prepare Filipinos for eventual self-governance—it was also a calculated strategy to advance American political and economic interests. The new colonial government actively sought to disassociate Filipino identity from Spanish influence by presenting anything associated with Spain as outdated, backward, or regressive. As a result, traditional Spanish customs and institutions were gradually replaced with American practices.

A key component of this transformation was the institutionalization of the English language. With the arrival of the *Thomasites*—American teachers sent to establish public education in the Philippines—English was established as the official medium of instruction in schools and became the primary language of governance and social mobility. Through free public education, English was promoted as both a practical skill and a symbol of modernity. In addition to language, American administrators introduced new recreational and cultural practices that replaced or overshadowed earlier traditions. Popular Spanish pastimes such as *sabong* (cockfighting) and widespread opium use were discouraged in favor of organized sports such as basketball, volleyball, and football, which promoted discipline, teamwork, and physical health. These American sports quickly gained popularity, especially among the youth, and remain integral to Filipino culture today.

Western fashion trends also began to influence Filipino attire. Traditional clothing gave way to imported styles, with long gowns, Sunday dresses, tuxedos, and coats becoming fashionable among the urban middle class and elite. These visible changes in everyday life signaled a broader cultural shift toward Americanization that redefined Filipino identity during the colonial period. The landscape of Philippine literature underwent a significant transformation during the American colonial period, driven by the parallel developments in education, language policy, and print culture. With the introduction of a public school system using English as the medium of instruction, Filipino writers were encouraged—if not compelled—to adopt English as their primary language for literary expression.

This cultural assimilation strategy marked a turning point in the nation's literary history. Spanish-language literature, once dominant during the previous colonial period, was rapidly replaced by English-language works. The transition was not limited to the language of instruction; it extended to the types of books available, the themes explored in literature, and the very forms of writing considered acceptable or modern. Filipino writers began to experiment with new literary forms such as free verse poetry, the modern short story, and the critical essay. Among the most notable literary figures of the time were José García Villa, whose innovative poetry in English earned him international acclaim, and Virgilio Almario, who later championed literature in the national language. The rise of English also fostered the emergence of a bilingual or English-dominant literary elite, further widening the gap between educated Filipinos and those who remained rooted in vernacular languages.

The growth of the press during this period also played a vital role in shaping public discourse. Publications such as the *Philippine Free Press* and the *Philippine Herald* became

platforms for literary expression, political commentary, and journalistic experimentation. School publications like the *College Folio* nurtured the talents of young writers and helped develop a critical literary voice. Over time, these outlets not only promoted American ideals but also served as vehicles for subtly subversive and nationalistic sentiments, reflecting the complex relationship between colonial influence and emerging Filipino identity.

2. Education as a tool for Social Transformation

The impact of the American educational program in the Philippines was deeply felt in the social fabric of colonial life. For the American colonial government, education was not merely an academic endeavor but a vital instrument for elevating the social status of the Filipino people—particularly the marginalized sectors of society. The Americans believed that many of the Philippines' social problems were rooted in the lack of access to education. Thus, the establishment of a free, public, and secular school system became a cornerstone of their colonial policy. During the Spanish period, access to education was limited primarily to the elite class, known as the *gente ilustrada*, while the majority—referred to as *gente baja*—remained largely illiterate and excluded from formal learning. The public school system established by the Spaniards in 1863 had limited reach and served mainly the upper classes. In contrast, the American administration placed a high priority on providing universal education, including for the rural poor, as a means of achieving long-term social stability and progress.

The Americans viewed the transformation of the *gente baja* into an educated and self-reliant class as a key objective of their civilizing mission. They envisioned an independent peasantry—owning their own land, managing their finances, and exercising civic responsibilities. Education, in their view, would empower Filipinos to escape cycles of debt, dependence, and subjugation. This shift from a “too-dependent class” to a self-respecting and independent citizenry was central to American social reform efforts in the Philippines.

To achieve this, the Americans introduced a liberal curriculum that included English, arithmetic, geography, Philippine history and government, and science subjects such as botany, zoology, and human physiology. In addition to academic subjects, vocational education was emphasized: boys were trained in agriculture, shop work, industrial arts, and fisheries, while girls received instruction in domestic sciences, including household management, sanitation, childcare, and basic health care. This gendered curriculum reflected both the American ideals of civic education and their assumptions about gender roles in colonial society. One of the most significant legacies of American education was its expansion to include primary, intermediate, secondary, and tertiary levels. For the first time in Philippine history, the opportunity to pursue higher education was extended beyond the elite. This democratization of education allowed members of the lower classes to access opportunities previously reserved for the privileged few.

As more Filipinos attained higher education, many began to enter the middle and upper ranks of the colonial civil service. This expansion of the educated class contributed to a restructuring of the Filipino elite and changed social attitudes toward occupation and status. While educational attainment alone did not guarantee elite status, it became a crucial pathway to social mobility. In this way, the American

educational system played a transformative role in reshaping the Philippine social hierarchy.

Moreover, the exposure to liberal and Western ideas through education laid the groundwork for developing a sense of self-governance among Filipinos. Education fostered not only literacy and technical skills but also civic consciousness, personal dignity, and awareness of civil rights. It cultivated in the Filipino people the intellectual foundation necessary to participate in democratic life—an essential goal of American colonial policy.

Recognizing education as the bedrock of a self-governing colony, President William McKinley explicitly instructed the Philippine Commission to prioritize the establishment of an extensive educational system. The Commission followed this directive by laying down the institutional structures of public instruction, making education the central pillar of the American colonial project in the archipelago.

As a result of progressive efforts toward self-governance, by 1902, three out of the eight seats on the Philippine Commission—the executive body of the colonial government—were allocated to Filipino citizens. This inclusion marked a significant step, as Filipinos began to gain practical experience in public administration, not merely as subordinates but as respected colleagues alongside their American counterparts.

Among the most notable achievements of American-led social reform was the integration of health education and community sanitation into the broader public instruction agenda. Recognizing the intimate connection between education and social welfare, the colonial government launched campaigns to improve economic and health conditions through community-based programs. These included adult education courses that resembled extension programs in agricultural colleges across the continental United States. Such programs were carried out by schoolteachers and other government officials, reflecting the American belief that the school could be a central agent of social change.

In schools, hygiene and sanitation were taught as essential components of daily life. Lessons on personal hygiene, environmental cleanliness, and disease prevention were integrated into the curriculum to address the widespread health problems afflicting Filipino communities. Public instruction became a strategic channel for disseminating critical health information, aiming to foster not just academic learning but behavioral transformation.

These efforts produced tangible results. Between 1912 and 1914, significant sanitary problems were brought under control, aided by systematic health education campaigns. However, the initial challenges were substantial. As noted by historians Teodoro Agoncillo and Milagros Guerrero:

Superstition-ridden and ignorant of the strange power of the minute germs to cause deadly diseases, [and] were not easily convinced by the efficacy of medical methods in combating the cause of death from various sickness. The early Americans, then, were up against a fundable wall of ignorance and superstition... (Agoncillo and Guerrero, 425- 26)

On the other hand, American education was increasingly perceived by Filipinos as a positive and transformative force. It brought about fundamental changes that improved the quality of social life and instilled a strong desire for learning

and upward social mobility. Education became not only a tool for personal development but also a pathway to greater opportunities and enhanced social standing. For many Filipinos, academic achievement emerged as a vital prerequisite for professional success and societal recognition. As the Philippines approached the promise of independence, a profound shift in the national outlook was underway. The people found themselves entering a new era, one in which self-governance and national responsibility were within reach. In this context, education assumed an even more critical role.

A government-issued pamphlet during the Commonwealth period emphasized this urgency:

The Philippine people are now facing a complete change in their situation. Independence is assured in the present decade. Preparation for the intelligent assumption of the responsibilities involved cannot get underway too quickly. The people have a right to—and doubtless will—look to the schools to assume a large share in this preparation. It has been pointed out... that an excellent beginning has been made through education toward the development of the social and economic adequacy which must accompany political independence. How best to build on the present achievements in order to complete the task in the short period of 10 years is an imminent problem demanding a thorough stocktaking of the present status as a basis for planning for the future, (*U.S. Colonial Education Policy Pamphlet, 1930s*)

This statement captures the growing consensus that education was not merely a colonial legacy but an essential foundation for nation-building. As Filipinos prepared to assume the responsibilities of self-rule, schools were seen as crucial institutions in shaping a citizenry capable of sustaining democracy, economic productivity, and national identity. The successes of American education, though not without limitations, provided a platform on which the Filipino people could construct their own future.

3. Challenges and Filipino Responses to the American Educational System

3.1 Major Challenges in Implementing the American Educational Program

One of the most pressing difficulties was organizing a system of public instruction that would reach all Filipino children, not just the elite. This required placing schools within the reach of over 12,000 barrios across the archipelago. There was a severe lack of trained Filipino teachers, especially those capable of teaching in English. Initially, American soldiers served as teachers, but their numbers were insufficient. To address this, the government brought in 600 American teachers known as the Thomasites in 1901 and later established the Pensionado Program in 1903. This program sent promising Filipino students to study in the U.S. with the expectation that they would return and serve in the educational system. The rapid expansion of the school system outpaced available resources. Many schoolhouses had to be built, and there was a shortage of books, furniture, and instructional materials. Early textbooks were imported from the United States, initially in Spanish due to the mistaken assumption that Spanish was widely understood. These were soon replaced by English-language texts. The professional

preparation of Filipino teachers was limited. Only a small number of normal schools existed, and they could not meet the demand for qualified instructors. As a result, many of the 27,000 teachers employed lacked even basic pedagogical training. Funding for education came from national, provincial, and municipal budgets, supplemented by voluntary contributions and tuition fees. In 1932, public school expenditures reached ₱27,911,060—about ₱23.26 per student. Despite these allocations, teacher salaries remained low and inconsistent, especially in rural areas. Male teachers in first-class towns were paid ₱35 a month, with those in lower classifications receiving less; female teachers received ₱5 less across all classes. Perhaps the most difficult challenge was building an effective educational bureaucracy. The system needed to be administered systematically and consistently to meet its objectives and ensure sustainability. Reformulating educational goals, adjusting curricula, training teachers, and maximizing financial resources became critical priorities moving into the 1930s.

3.2 Filipino Responses to American Education

Filipino responses to American education were varied and complex. On one hand, the first decade of implementation saw increasing Filipino support. Many rural families viewed education as a gateway to improved socio-economic status. The American school system was perceived as a vehicle for progress, democracy, and individual advancement—especially after centuries of limited access under Spanish colonial rule. However, not all sectors welcomed the changes enthusiastically:

Older teachers who had served under the Spanish regime felt displaced by the new English-based system, which rendered their training and experience obsolete. The imposition of a foreign language as the medium of instruction proved difficult in a country marked by linguistic diversity. For many students, learning in English created a barrier to understanding. Some Filipino intellectuals and nationalists feared that the Americanized curriculum diluted Filipino identity. They expressed concern about the cultural alienation that might arise from teaching foreign values and undermining native traditions. Despite these criticisms, the American education system laid the foundation for the modern Filipino public school system. It enabled the emergence of a new class of professionals and bureaucrats, many of whom played pivotal roles in nation-building in the decades to come.

Conclusion

Education is a dynamic and time-tested social force that reflects and shapes historical change. In the Philippines, educational development has been inextricably linked to its colonial past and socio-political transformation. The Philippine educational system evolved through various stages, shaped profoundly by both Spanish and American colonial influences. Under Spanish rule, education was primarily religious in nature, limited in access, and designed to support the interests of the clergy and colonial elite. The American period, in contrast, saw massive expansion and secularization of education, with an emphasis on democratization, modernization, and civic training. American reforms aimed not only to pacify the population but also to prepare the Filipinos for self-governance. These reforms brought about a remarkable increase in literacy rates, school attendance, and access to higher education.

American education reoriented Filipino society toward values such as democracy, individual rights, scientific reasoning, and meritocracy. Many Filipinos educated under the American system went on to pursue professions in law, medicine, journalism, public service, and the arts—often rising to prominent positions in society. Education became a means for the *gente baja*—the lower class—to rise in social standing, effectively altering the socio-economic landscape of the country. Yet, the American legacy in Philippine education was not without its complexities. The dominance of English, the marginalization of local languages and traditions, and the shaping of a Westernized Filipino identity continue to spark debate. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that American education brought profound and lasting changes to Filipino society.

Even today, the structural framework, values, and aspirations instilled during the American colonial period remain embedded in the Philippine educational system. These developments continue to shape national identity, social mobility, and the country's broader trajectory toward progress and self-determination.

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