

2015-07-09

How education shaped communist Cuba

P.W. Hare, Andy S Gomez. 2015. "How Education Shaped Communist Cuba." The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com>
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/40169>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

F is for Fidel, Y is for Yanqui: The Prospects for US Cuba cooperation in Education

Dr Andy S. Gomez and Paul Webster Hare

F is for Fidel, Y is for Yanqui¹. This story of how the alphabet was taught in revolutionary Cuba shows how far the US-Cuba educational divide has stretched. No sector illustrates better how Cuba and US have grown apart in over 50 years. Cuba claims today that its education standards are among the highest in the world and Cuba has educated tens of thousands of foreign students, mostly in medicine, for decades. The US educational establishment knows little about the methods used in Cuban education nor what practical opportunities for collaboration in research and business might exist. With the agreement of December 17th 2014 that may be about to change.

THE PAST

The US and Cuba built strong links in education for over 50 years after Cuba's independence from Spain in 1902. The first American football game played by the University of Miami in 1926 was against the University of Havana. Ruston Academy, founded in Havana by Americans in 1920, became a model international school for the US expat community and prominent Cuban families. Fidel and Raul Castro both attended elite Catholic schools, first in Santiago then at the Colegio de Belén in Havana. Raul Castro's wife, Vilma Espin, whose father was a senior official with Bacardi, attended MIT in the 1950s. In 1959 the number of Americans expats in Cuba was not enormous, probably under 50000. Only 6500 were formally registered as residents of Cuba but many more came back and forth. Cuban and US culture – jazz, baseball, Coca-Cola, Chevrolets – were in regular interaction.

Cuban education had been a major political issue in Cuba before the revolution. In the 1940 constitution enacted under Fulgencio Batista, there was a requirement that ministry of education should have the largest budget of any in government, except in cases of emergency. And the same constitution provided for compulsory primary education between the ages of 6-14. Yet in 1953, the last full census taken before the Revolution, only 44% of children in these age groups were in school. The absentee figures were much higher in the rural areas. Cuba was not of course exceptional for these times. In the 1950s, though Cuba had an overall illiteracy rate of 23% with 53% in rural areas, this was a good comparative figure for Latin America. Only the populations of Chile, Uruguay, Argentina were more literate than Cuba. Cuba's secondary school attendance was high as well. In 1953 12% of those between 15-19 were in school, a very high figure for Latin America. And 20000 Cubans were enrolled in university. Nevertheless standards varied and the private fee-paying schools were chosen by the affluent Cubans, with inequalities mirroring those in wider Cuban society of the 1950s.

¹ Garcia, Luis 2006, *Child of the Revolution: Growing up in Castro's Cuba*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney

So the scene was set for Fidel Castro to select education as a major issue for his revolution. He mentioned plans to raise teachers' salaries and improve rural schools briefly in the manifesto of his July 26th revolution. But once in power there was no doubt about the pivotal role he saw for education in consolidating his revolution. A significant feature of his policy was that education would be provided universally by the state but would require those receiving it to participate in acts during and after their education that would promote government policies. They would also be required to study government approved courses which tolerated no criticism of socialism as a way of life. Education was seen as key to the revolution taking hold and creating an educated nation loyal to the government.

THE REVOLUTION AND EDUCATION

The Cuban government's illiteracy campaign was an early example of mobilization, the revolution hitting the ground running. Many of the enlisted teachers were themselves high school students. By 1961, when the literacy campaign was at its height, Fidel Castro began closing all private schools, many of them run by the Catholic Church. This followed the breaking of diplomatic relations with the US and the seizure of US commercial and residential property. The battleground with the US therefore had an early educational focus. And it provoked the first wave of Cuban exiles, those who did not like the direction the revolution was taking. The Pedro Pan flights were of school-age children whose parents preferred exile in the US to indoctrination. Many teachers from the old regime followed and Cuba faced a teacher shortage. The Colegio de Belén which the Castros had attended was reestablished in Miami.

Increasingly Cuban education was geared to the needs of the state. As Cuba became officially socialist, children followed the Marxist maxim of combining work and study. They were given tasks like working in agriculture or tending the gardens of the school. Adolescents were sent to boarding school for a period to make sure their loyalty to the revolution was secure. Engineering and technical education took priority over the arts. Rebellious youth who mimicked the long hair and western ethos of the Woodstock/Beatles era were punished. The revolution would determine what was appropriate appearance and behavior. Elite schools like the Centro Vocacional de Lenin on the outskirts of Havana catered for the children of the top party cadres and military.

The resources Fidel received from the Soviet Union funded a massive increase in new institutions. At the end of the 1960s there were over 30000 students at technical schools and 40000 at universities, compared to 6000 and 20000 in 1958. Many new schools were opened in the remote rural regions of Cuba. Fidel however was never a believer in education for its own sake. His vision for education was that the revolution would be built doing practical work, not in university classrooms, In 1966 he chided university students for having less 'revolutionary consciousness' than agronomists. In 1968 he forecast that all Cuban universities could be abolished, since only a few activities would require higher studies. In future 'practically every factory, every agricultural zone, every hospital, every school will be a university.' The individual competition for grades or achievement was played down in favor of nurturing the ethos of the 'colectivo'.

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Cuba's resources were no longer unlimited. The student population continued to grow until 2008 but increasingly there were no jobs that matched their qualifications. All university entrants had to be approved by local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution political and military connections counted for much in admission for courses that promised better-paying jobs like such as in IT, tourism and medicine. Universities continued to be free but the percentage of total budget devoted to education – at 34% one of the world's highest - was not sustainable.

In 1989, university professors along with doctors had been at the top of the salary scale. But thereafter their relative pay declined in comparison to others such as small private farmers and the 'self-employed' in black markets. Many professionally qualified, including teachers, moved to these sectors. The university dropout rate rose above 30% and increasingly students looked elsewhere to earn money. Absenteeism of both students and teachers became common and among the opportunities that the black market threw up was private tutoring.

Despite its economic difficulties, Cuba's international education outreach has continued. But the Cuban government increasingly charges governments for their students attending such institutions as the Latin American Medical School. Since 1999 Cuba has educated over 20000 medical students so the importance of this revenue is considerable. Details of the charges are not published but they mirror the significant fees now earned by the Cuban government for its medical professionals sent overseas.

The US and Cuba stated that the aims of the agreement on December 17th 2014 included the establishment of full diplomatic relations. But it did not change anything in Cuba's education system. The Cuban government is unlikely to remove its monopoly on materials, curriculum or teaching institutions in education and informal opinion polls suggest Cubans support the free public education that the revolution has maintained. The Cuban state's primary requirement for the sector is for hard currency to keep open schools and also to maintain a teacher quorum. 60% of all teachers are women and they are taking the brunt of the downsizing which Raul Castro has begun. Large numbers of community colleges and rural prep schools have been closed. University enrollment dropped by 36% between 2008 and 2011 and admission standards have been raised. Cuban parents employ private tutors to give their children an edge. Private education is now again making small unofficial inroads in Cuba.

THE FUTURE OF CUBAN EDUCATION

The primary motive of the Cuban government in agreeing the rapprochement with the US was economic – not political. Yet Raul Castro knows Cuba will not receive a decisive and sustained boost to its economy if it sits back and thinks 'business as usual' in education. If Raul Castro intends to transform the Cuban economy then Cuba will need educational reform to complement it. The educational transition process in post-Communist countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic worked not because there was a change in the government, but because of a complete transformation of the prevailing political system.

Though rejecting political reform Raul Castro has called for new ideas, a new self reliance from Cubans and an end to the inverted pyramid of salary payment. All of these objectives have implications for education. Of the institutions central to the revolutionary government, education has been the most crucial because it represented the process of ideological transfer, without which the Cuban state had no claim to its citizenry. The Cuban government has long considered ideas weapons in the class struggle against capitalism and western-style democracy. They stress the function of education at all levels in facilitating political indoctrination of the population and value education as a way to foster social equality. This objective can no longer be taken for granted. Many Cubans, especially those born after the fall of the Soviet Union- now over 2 million out of 11 million - no longer believe in the Marxist ideology.

As the transitions of the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe have shown, it is not easy to demolish years of totalitarian control without addressing the issue of reconstruction - particularly psychological reconstruction. Citizens of post-communist nations have understood that a new curriculum for their schools is as important as a revised constitution for their governments. They recognize that schools must teach young citizens the theory and practices of a democracy if they are to develop and sustain a free society and government. Cuba is an excellent case study of a political system that has exercised effective government social control over ideology and political culture. The prevailing system has successfully reduced conceptual sophistication by emphasizing the importance of the collective well-being of the state, not the individual. The system has broken down the ability of individuals to claim ownership of central historical experiences, beliefs, values, and myths that a new education system will have to restore. However, any educational transition will involve a lengthy passage from what has become accepted as certain to an end point that is initially uncertain.

Cuba's government has had the opportunity to create institutions, collective memories, and explanations of how the world operates as part of their educational system from an early age. Any "new" education system will need to break down these beliefs and create new ones while minimizing the psychological trauma involved. The implementation of new behavior patterns and value systems will have to be established slowly and with flexibility. Otherwise, Cuba will replicate what has occurred in some post-communist states, where the new system confuses its citizens who have become nostalgic for the "old ways" not because they were better but because they knew how to behave within the structure of social control.

EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

US educators will know that democratic principles cannot be imported or exported from one country to another. However, the "new" policies of the Obama administration towards Cuba

lift further some key restrictions that will enable more people to people contact. This can be very constructive in beginning to develop in Cuban minds the reality of "change". More far-reaching changes now seem feasible. If the government is to maximize or even exploit partially the opportunities of a closer relationship with the US, Cuba needs a workforce capable of seizing them. Even though the US also has 'free' public schools and subsidized state universities, US educators and companies will need to recognize that the Cuban educational system is currently a world apart from the centralized and conforming system that Cuba has established.

If the Cuban economic reforms are to function, then the Cuban population will need retraining at all levels. Part of this retraining will nurture a new civil society. Concepts like civic knowledge, civic skills and civic virtues demonstrate there are more than 90 miles of separation between US and Cuban concepts of 'civic education'. Conformity is challenged by individuality; stability by instability; censorship by freedom of expression. Equally there is little common ground on issues like the rule of law, how a government represents individuals and what political participation really means. To quote a favorite phrase used by Fidel Castro, there will need to be a 'battle of ideas'.

A central feature of civic education for a constitutional democracy is the development of intellectual and participatory skills – an important common good. Intellectual skills empower citizens to identify, describe, and explain information and ideas pertinent to public issues and defend their points of view. The development of civic skills requires active learning by students both inside and outside the classroom. The individual is being educated for his or her own benefit to function better in society, not just to become another asset for that society. Such virtues as self-discipline, compassion, tolerance and mutual respect for all regardless of political opinions are indispensable to the proper functioning of any civil society. These characteristics must be nurtured through social agencies, including schools, to encourage a government responsive and accountable to its citizens, rather than one which determines how they should be educated.

THE CURRENT REALITY – THE DISTANCE IS CLOSING

Many Cubans are already receiving a different type of informal education from the visits, funding and conversations with Cuban Americans. President Obama's changes in April 2009 helped accelerate this opening of minds in both countries. And these families are now likely to be planning to invest in businesses and institutions that serve the education sector. The December 17 agreement facilitated these visits from US passport holders in the 12 categories approved for general license, several of which cover educational purposes. Such travelers will be permitted to use US credit and debit cards and US non-profits and universities to open bank accounts.

Cuba's education will face reforms along with the rest of the economy in the new era of Raul Castro's 2+2=4 economics. Cuba badly needs hard currency as its political allies like Venezuela, Iran and Russia face economic downturns. Even China is unlikely to bankroll big

infrastructure projects. So the opportunities the US offers for accessing new resources are undeniably attractive. Cuba's internal economic reforms have so far been slow and, with some exceptions, timid. Whatever the future holds education will increasingly compete for resources with other sectors in the economy. Cuba's poor internet infrastructure and low access is also a major hindrance on progress in education and in economic modernization. Beyond this, Cuba's businesses and foreign investors will increasingly compete for the best Cuban students. Many will be highly motivated after decades of earning very meager wages. They are disciplined and many speak excellent English. And government-employed teachers will now be able to provide consulting advice to businesses including foreign investors.

FIRST STEPS : PRACTICAL COOPERATION

A fully open relationship between US and Cuba – which of course is far from what December 17th brought - would have many implications for education. But the first consequences will be a new transparency. As US and Cuban educational institutions interact there will be a huge increase in mutual knowledge, unimpeded by government filters.

Though the December agreement is symbolically important there have already been many academic exchanges in both directions, legal under existing travel rules. How can these be built on?

- (1) Cuban and US universities could expand existing relationships in the areas of student and faculty exchange.
- (2) US institutions could provide fellowships and internships for Cuban students to study and conduct research in the US
- (3) The US could provide training for k-12 teachers in American universities. These teachers would go back and train others.
- (4) Cuban and US universities could identify areas of mutual interest and conduct seminars and workshops in these areas. One example is natural disasters
- (5) On a pilot basis the US might offer to fund and upgrade technology to enable Cuban institutions to participate in distance learning. US IT equipment can be supplied to Cuba under the new agreement.
- (6) The US might work with Cuba in establishing community colleges on the island that focus on technical and vocational education, vital for Cuba's economic prospects.
- (7) The Cuban American community has already taken a lead in providing business related training to Cuban entrepreneurs in Florida. Start UP Cuba and Cuba Emprende are examples of practical interconnections being fostered. The average age of those trained has been 30 and 70% of those participating have been women. The US government could announce it would support such support for the Cuban 'self-employed'.
- (8) As a signal of progress to 'normality' Cuban students could be invited to apply for US Fulbright scholarships.
- (9) Training in sports and the performing arts have obvious synergies for US and Cuban students. This might be an early US focus.

Conclusion : Lessons Learned from the Past

Fifty years of differences will not produce an easy A for 'Acuerdo' on education in a new US Cuba alphabet. Education transition in Cuba will face many obstacles - the physical reconstruction of schools, materials and curriculum, teacher training and ideological and psychological reorientation. But with initiative on both sides some common ground can be established. No longer will it make sense for a Cuban leader to repeat Fidel Castro's words: 'the universities are only available to those who share my revolutionary beliefs'. And the very diversity of US institutions at all levels of education will show the Cubans that no single approach produces all the answers. In the new era of US Cuba relations, - if it genuinely proves to be such - there are few more promising areas for US Cuba cooperation than education.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Andy S. Gomez is an academic scholar in Cuban Studies. He served as Senior Fellow at the Cuban Institute at the University of Miami and was a Non-Resident Senior Fellow on Foreign Policy (US-Cuba) at the Brookings Institution. Dr Gomez was Assistant Provost and Dean of International Studies at the University of Miami and the Undersecretary of Education and Chief of Staff at the Executive Office of Education in Massachusetts during the administration of Governor Weld (1991 – 1994). Gomez received a Doctor in Education from Harvard University. His book 'Social Challenges Facing Cuba' was published in 2014.

Ambassador Paul Webster Hare was a British diplomat for 30 years and served as UK ambassador to Cuba from 2001-04. He was educated at Oxford University and the College of Law in London and now teaches international relations at Boston University. He has written widely on Cuba. His book 'Making Diplomacy Work: Intelligent Innovation for the Modern World' was published in February 2015.