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The Cuban Literacy Campaign at 50 Formal and Tacit Learning in Revolutionary Education

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Abstract

December 22, 2011, marked the 50th anniversary of the end of the Cuban Literacy Campaign, an initiative that dramatically increased literacy rates across the island and consolidated the presence of the revolutionary government. While Cuban schools are widely celebrated, a paucity of recent scholarship persists treating the structure and tenets, as well as the formal and tacit content of Cuban education. Beginning with an analysis of the political content of the literacy campaign, this article reviews the structure and content of Cuban education with a focus on the role of ideology. While numerous scholars have demonstrated the prescriptive and reproductive function of schooling Euro-American contexts, little comparative international work has treated the interfunction of schooling and ideology in the Global South. This article locates the literacy campaign as the formal genesis of contemporary Cuban ideology. Indeed the literacy campaign was the beginning of a discursive relationship that continues today.



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Education transforms a little animal into a person. If we do not come to be human beings in the profoundest sense of the word, our species cannot survive. Your task [as teachers], and I think of you as you and us, is devoted to attaining those objectives with all our forces. That proposition defines the meaning of our Battle of Ideas and explains our tremendous efforts to create a general integral culture in our people, as something that no human community can do without.

Fidel Castro

(Havana's 12th World Congress on Comparative Education, 2004)

Introduction

To argue Cuba is unique makes about as much of a scholarly contribution as might the insistence that water is wet. Among the countless institutions, systems, groups, histories and cultures which are inimitably Cuban however, education is the most important for understanding how, why and what people know in Cuba. While a history of Cuban discourse is beyond the scope of this article, a few points are noteworthy when considering knowledge production on the island. Cuba is relatively free of American cultural media influence. The Cuban Government faces little competition for public mental space. The influence of corporate media and non-governmental organizations (both national and international) is nowhere near comparable to that in capitalist economies. Religion plays a negligible role in politics and public policy. Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. Among the various faces and interfaces of the Cuban government, there is no more important point for the transmission of government thinking (from institution to individuals and the home) than schools. Cuban education is the primary access point between the institutions of the state and the private lives of Cubans. This relationship began in earnest with the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961.

December 22, 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of the end of the Cuban literacy campaign, a national initiative undertaken and directed by the new Cuban Revolutionary Government. The campaign was the government's first major national undertaking and within one year literacy rates rose in all areas of the country. Armed with lanterns, pencils and papers, volunteers traveled the country reaching every populated area of the island. Although they faced occasional resistance, they were welcomed for the most part as teachers and as countrymen and women, and as ambassadors of the new government—to wit the new Cuba. The literacy campaign (in Spanish the *Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización en Cuba*) served as an ideological anchor for Cuban education thereafter. As a center piece of the new state apparatus, free, compulsory and quality education would serve, alongside healthcare, as the most celebrated and well-known achievement of the Cuban revolution. Despite international acclaim and notoriety, a paucity of recent scholarship persists treating education in Cuba. This article thus provides an introduction to, and review of, the structure and content of Cuban education with a particular focus on the ideological function of nationalized policy and curriculum. Using a broad definition of literacy, which includes socio-political readings of the individual and society, this article locates the literacy campaign as the formal genesis of contemporary Cuban national ideology. While a diversity of scholars including hooks (2003), McLaren (2006), Freire (1997), Dei (1996), Apple (1978), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and others have demonstrated the prescriptive and reproductive function of schooling in the Euro-American contexts, little

comparative international work has treated the interfunction of schooling and ideology in the Global South. In the Cuban case in particular, such analysis has tended toward either sweeping endorsement or total condemnation.

As a starting point for a nuanced understanding of ideology and education in Cuba, the Literacy Campaign is a relevant anchor from which to navigate the complicated terrain of revolutionary Cuba and its educational project. In addition to teaching people to read, the campaign marked the dissemination of a national common sense and indeed a nationwide project of socio-cultural immersion wherein Cuba and Cubans were defined in light of revolutionary narratives, values and teleologies. Benedict Anderson argues that such conceptions exist within and rely upon “finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (2003 p. 7). Indeed in redefining Cuba and Cubans, the world beyond Cuba’s shores (both physically and metaphorically) was redefined as well; an understanding of what Cuba and Cubans were, relied in part upon binary notions of what Cuba and Cubans were not. The literacy campaign was thus the formal beginning of a national ideological overhaul which was at once creative and negative, as the development of a revolutionary socialism was accompanied by the ideological negation of capitalism.

This article emerges from a larger research project on Cuban teachers, race and education in Cuba. Although I do not draw on the collected data here, this article is informed by my descriptive analytic field notes, as well as side conversations with research participants (Kawulich 2005). I have also included references to and excerpts from materials (such as tests, textbooks, and other resources) provided by research participants. The first section of this article introduces the literacy campaign and its significance for the revolutionary project with a focus on the political and social content of the campaign. This section locates the campaign in historical and comparative context, investigates the early educational initiatives of the revolutionary government, and sketches the results and implications of these efforts. The second section provides an overview of the structure and content of Cuba’s education system, as well as its relationship to broader political imperatives. This section sketches the policy trajectory of Cuban education over the past half century, with a focus on the relationship between schooling, society and ideology. A short conclusion follows.

Education, the Revolution and the Campaign: Politics and Structure of Common Sense

True or False:

- Cuban women played a significant role in the war of 1895.
- The ideas of Martí are useful in our Battle of Ideas.
- The Revolutionary Party of Cuba was created by Antonio Maceo

(Excerpt from a grade 2 history quiz, Desonto, 2008)

The literacy campaign is best understood by considering literacy beyond the concepts of numeracy and alphabetization to include socio-political literacies, which inform, produce and allow particular readings and understandings of self and society. Nationalized in 1961, and beginning the same year with Cuba’s ‘Year of Education’, revolutionary education has been at the heart of the revolutionary project. In 1961, over 120,632 volunteer teachers, along with 147,788 trained and paid teachers participated in a nationwide literacy campaign which reduced the illiteracy rate from almost 24% to 3.9% (Huberman and Sweezy 1969, pp. 25–26). The concept of a literacy campaign was not new. Schultz (2009) points out the Cuban campaign of

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1961, was modeled on previous literacy campaigns in Argentina, Brazil and other parts of Latin America. The success and duration of the literacy campaign were unparalleled, however, both before and since. In under a year, nearly all Cubans could participate in the shared conversation of the written word. In the Cuban case, this conversation was intended with particular aims and topics. The unprecedented achievement and exercise in popular alphabetization was infused with a highly political revolutionary pedagogy.

In addition to introducing the rural and disenfranchised populations to universal public education, people were simultaneously inculcated in revolutionary ideals of equality, collectivism and uncompromising support for the new government. Urban schools closed so that senior students could travel as *brigadistas*, fighting in the battle against illiteracy. In many ways, the literacy campaign was a continuation of the revolutionary struggle—a struggle against cultural poverty at the hands of imperialism, a struggle against the many challenges of building a new nation. A re-enactment of the Bay of Pigs invasion was staged wherein boatloads of uniformed *brigadistas* ‘invaded’ the Playa Del Girón carrying giant prop pencils.¹ In her favourable summary of the campaign, Joanne Elvy (2009) points out that for some, the campaign was akin to the coming of Jesus Christ. Under the revolutionary government, the racialized, gendered and class based inequities within previous educational models were attributed to the politics and ideology of previous governments (on the campaign see Gillette 1972, Garcia 1986, Kozol 1978, Sanders 1983, and Torres 1991). The new educational approach was overtly politicised and framed as a struggle in and of itself. The 1961 pamphlet given to the hundreds of thousands of instructors picks up this theme, stating in its introductory section:

We are certain that people will not fail in the goals we have outlined. Therefore, we will begin this campaign with the assurance that in spite of all the obstacles we may have, in spite of all the aggressions we will have to face ‘WE WILL WIN’ (Fagen 1964, p.24).

The specific politics of the literacy campaign were by no means abstract or hard to find. The instructor’s manual lists 26 political themes meant to inform the pedagogy and context of teacher literacy instruction. Themes range from “Fidel is Our Leader,” to “This Land is Our Land,” to “Racial Discrimination,” to Imperialism,” to “International Unity,” to “Popular Recreation.”² Volunteers were selected from largely urban populations of interested and literate young people (14 and older). The campaign brought youth of colour, many of whom were young women, into rural areas and positioned them in locations of discursive, and to a certain degree moral, authority. Over 80% of *brigadistas*, as well as the teaching force directly thereafter, came from working class backgrounds (García 2009). Although class, race and gender barriers were by no

¹ The Bay of Pigs Invasion (*La Batalla de la Playa Girón* in Spanish), was an unsuccessful attempt (under US President John Kennedy) by an US armed and trained force of Cuban exiles to attack Cuba. The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces defeated the invaders in under than three days, and the event served to powerfully consolidate Fidel Castro’s position.

² Complete List: Theme I, The Revolution; Theme II, Fidel is Our Leader; Theme III, This Land is Our Land; Theme IV, The Cooperatives; Theme V, The right to Housing; Theme VI, Cuba has Riches and Was Poor; Theme VII, Nationalization; Theme VIII, Industrialization; Theme IX, The Revolution is Converting the Barracks into Schools; Theme X, Racial Discrimination; Theme XI, Friends and Enemies; Theme XII, Imperialism; Theme XIII, International Trade; Theme XIV, War and Peace; Theme XV, International Unity; Theme XVI, Democracy; Theme XVII, Workers and Peasants; Theme XVIII, The People, United and Alert; Theme XIX, Freedom of Worship; Theme XX, Health; Theme XXI, Popular Recreation; Theme XXII, Alphabetization; Theme XXIII, The Revolution is Winning All its Battles; and Theme XIV, The Declaration of Havana.

means eradicated through this dynamic, the phenomenon of middle-aged white male farmers taking direction (on reading instruction and political ideology) from 16 year old black women would surely have been new to Cuba in 1961. De la Fuente writes:

Middle class citizens became personally involved in confronting poverty and ignorance. Blacks and whites joined in this effort, both as teachers and as students. Among the voluntary teachers participating in the campaign 30 percent were black or Mulatto. Adult education was also expanded and special schools created to address the needs of underprivileged groups such as domestic workers, a large number of whom were Afro-Cuban females. (2001, p. 275)

Working class people, people of colour, and women were positioned as knowers, possessors of the prized commodity of literacy and political enlightenment.

Alongside and related to support for the Revolution, was a new public morality of which education would be a transmitter. Kaptcia (2005) writes:

Education and morality have been essential codes of the Cuban ideological apparatus since the victory of the Revolution in 1959. Rooted deep in the political traditions that created that ideology, drove the rebellion and shaped the Revolution, but reinforced by the following radicalisation and mobilisations, these interrelated codes also informed the seminal experiences of the 1960s educational revolution and underpinned the ethos of the 'New Man.' (p. 399)

Alongside universalization of education and literacy came profound reforms to the content and delivery of education. While the new direction of Cuban education sought to stabilize the normative values of the Revolution and its principles, it sought simultaneously to counter the political values characterizing previous educational forms in Cuba. This initial transformation was one of ideas as well as of people. Teachers were asked to think, teach and act differently within their capacities as citizens, role models and instructors.

In a fascinating article that draws on interviews with self exiled Miami Cuban teachers, Provenzo and García (1983) describe the displacement experienced by teachers who refused to support the revolutionary discourse in education. Teachers reported feeling censored when previously accepted texts were banned and revolutionary material was provided in their place (Provenzo and García 1983). Teachers interviewed for the study describe the marginalization experienced by those who refused, or who were suspected by students, other teachers or parents of refusing to accept the political priorities of the revolution. Early retirement was encouraged for many, while others reported feeling judged and limited professionally. Although many of those interviewed were initially neutral or even supportive of the revolution and Fidel Castro, their professional experiences (likely in combination with other factors) often led them to a critical opposition to the revolution. In this sense, professional ideological alienation powerfully informed broad personal understandings of the revolution as a whole.

While censorship and book banning may be red flag words for many, it is important to note the silent preponderance of such phenomena (in more and less subtle forms) in many public schooling contexts in a range of countries, in the past and at present. Previous to the Cuban revolution there were of course, explicitly required courses and texts, as well as works considered inappropriate for the education of children (see Paulston 1974). Further, a corollary set of implicit and tacit structures and strictures existed governing the content and delivery of

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Cuban education (see Gillette 1972 and Pérez 1982). This is the nature of state education. As a diversity of scholars from hooks (2003), Freire (1997), Dei (1996), Apple (1978), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and many others have argued, education tends to produce/reproduce the politics and social arrangements of the state. Education in the pre-revolutionary period supported the capitalist structure of Cuban society and relied, as many educational systems have and continue to do, on top down models of information delivery by expert teachers to unknowing students: what Freire (1997) terms the banking model. The prerevolutionary capitalist system had specific social contours, both tacit and explicit. For example, inequitable race relations before the revolution were supported by a highly privatized education system which resulted in a two tiered structure with rich whites in well-funded private schools and working class whites and Afro-Cubans in underfunded public schools across the island (de la Fuente 2001). This accounts in part for the dramatic transformation of education in the post-1960 period. The revolutionary government was seeking to displace previous political, economic and cultural paradigms as created and recreated through education.

Renowned Cubanist Louis Pérez discusses the political and epistemic roots of the Cuban educational system in the pre-revolutionary period. Highly influenced by US imperial colonialism:

the educational experience sought to promote awe and admiration for things American and disesteem and deprecation for things Cuban. Nothing in the decades following the inauguration of the Republic in 1902 discouraged the persistence of these attitudes. The view of the United States as a magnanimous benefactor, upholding values worthy of emulation, served to bind the island to the United States long after the more formal constraints of the 1903 Permanent Treaty [handing back sovereignty in name to Cubans] had been abolished. (Pérez, 1982, p. 16)

Add this to the capitalist hegemony, which characterizes education in most capitalist countries, and the actions of revolutionary authorities to fundamentally—and quickly—change the political context of education are better understood. While teachers certainly lost power, we should not make the mistake of assuming they deserved it to begin with, or that this power served the general interest of students or their families. Provencia and Garcia mention that among the “exiled” Cuban teachers, there was an admission that things had become “less regimented” and “more open as far as students were concerned” (1983 p. 6). Further, it is worth considering the power relations at play, as some knowledges and approaches were legitimized and others delegitimized within the revolutionary project. Which bodies were empowered through this re-education process and which disempowered, and to what degree?

Extending the trajectory back further, the use of public education for political purposes predates even the post-1902 republic period. Indeed, in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Spanish colonial authorities established planned communities for former insurgents, formerly enslaved people and other displaced rural populations to reside in and farm. These communities, called *poblados* included schools for children to whom teachers would impart dominant values of the governing power. The government, Ferrer notes, “would construct primary schools for the production of ‘useful citizens loyal to the nation’” (1999, p. 104). As in the post-1960 period, the politics of pre-revolutionary schooling surely provided dominant readings of history which allowed for specific cultural interpretations. For example, the following passage from a school textbook (between 1919–1939, no date on original) reads:

There were some sugarcane growers who mistreated the blacks, just as they did the Indians. So many of the blacks fled from the area of one plantation to that of another or hid out in the woods to rob and murder passerby, for which they were hunted down. (Corzo 2003, pp 12–13)

The pre-revolutionary student would have learned myriad things from the passage's embedded historical wisdom, including: (a) poor treatment of the enslaved was not an across the board practice, (b) poor treatment of the enslaved (rather than, suppose, good treatment of the enslaved) would be the only motivation for escape, (c) black people are murderers and robbers, (d) the agency of the enslaved was irrelevant beyond the exercise of criminal tendencies, and d) that black people, in the end, got what was coming to them. In the late 1800s Cuban schooling was racially segregated and within black schools a restricted curriculum was followed. Afro-Cubans were prohibited from learning history, grammar, geography and drawing (Bronfman 2004, p. 70). Pre-revolutionary education, extending back nearly a century, was thus intensely ideological and this pattern of schooling in service of the state continued right up until the 1950s (Lutjens 1996).

Predictably, the early discursive battles in education were short-lived under the revolutionary government. Cubans supportive of the new government and its political program soon dominated the teaching force and the uphill battle to build the capacity for sustained universal education began. The 1960s saw the consolidation of the revolution within the nation's institutions—including its educational system. The literacy campaign was oriented toward standardized results across the island with the initial aim of a minimum first grade reading level for all Cubans. This was dubbed the Battle for the First Grade, and was followed by subsequent 'battles' for higher grades as well as various workplace learning campaigns (see Pérez 1995 and Kozol 1978 for more on these campaigns and Sahoy 1978 for a larger review of early educational policy). The final such literacy campaign (the Battle for the Ninth Grade) was waged, and 'won' between 1980–1985 (Montalvo 2009). By 1989, the national literacy rate exceeded a ninth grade level (García 2009). These tremendous achievements in popular literacy were infused with political curricula which predictably supported the revolution. Whatever conscientization occurred through the campaigns was oriented to support the revolutionary project. Further, Cuba's international political-economic allegiances and priorities were reflected in the content of education. Curriculum outlined the ally and enemy statuses of the USSR and the US respectively. As Willinsky (1998) and others have noted, education policy is often reflective of current and historic political and economic trends at the national and/or regional levels. As elsewhere, this is true for the Cuban case.

While there were certainly periods of relative political quiet, as Sawyer (2006) notes with regard to race and the state, Cuban social policy and rhetoric did and do remain fluid—with ebbs and flows of official ideological engagements and forays into certain areas. Traditionally, this comes via increased attention and funding in a given area as a matter of policy. For example, as the economic crisis of the Special Period (1990–2001) challenged various elements of government legitimacy, Cuban scholarship on education increasingly focused in the relationship between identity/personality and schooling (see for example the state sponsored works of Mitjans 1995, García 1999, and González 1995). As part of a larger effort to preserve the educational system The Battle of Ideas, a large scale cultural and educational project aimed to, among other things, reaffirm the ideals of the revolution within an increasingly interconnected world, was launched based on extensive research at the University of Havana. As part of the

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Battle of Ideas, the principle of universal access to higher education was emphasized, and universities were established in areas where there were previously none, as part of a process called *municipalización*. The 1990s also saw the creation of the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in 1998, in Havana, which provides medical training for thousands of foreign medical students and specialists each year. These programs are at once excellent initiatives which have improved the material lives of Cubans as well as foreigners, and simultaneously provide key elements of legitimacy to a government that seemed at the time, to be losing its place. These programs continue in 2012, and the Battle of Ideas is the umbrella under which education policy around equity (among other areas) is developed and delivered.

The Battle of Ideas is the most likely measure through which we might expect to see pedagogical and curricular development in the near future. Lourdes Montalvo, an educational philosopher at the University of Havana, both recommends and predicts that a focus on sovereignty, economic growth, education and work, social justice and equity, and family and community connection will become parts of the Battle of Ideas within education (Montalvo 2009). She is not alone. Well known anti-racist Cuban activist, Tomás Fernández Robaina of the National Library, suggests that the Eurocentric basis of Cuban education needs to be challenged but is optimistic about the possibilities for equity based social justice reform (Robaina 2009). Race is on the radar (officially and unofficially) as never before during the post-revolutionary period, and there is reason to think that race will be addressed within educational policy with markedly increased fashion in the coming years.

As de la Fuente (2001), Sawyer (2006), Kapcia (2005) and others have noted, during the Special Period many predicted the collapse of the revolutionary pillars of health care and education. Uriarte, for example, notes,

... many questioned whether continued financial commitment to the values of equity, universality, and government responsibility for social benefits would be possible and whether the wide range of benefits those values had spawned would survive under such a deep and all-encompassing crisis. (2004 p. 107)

With regard to education, austerity measures were implemented, in part due to sheer scarcity of material goods. Further, teacher retention became a significant problem. Uriarte continues:

Books were in short supply, as were pencils, paper, school uniforms, and all types of educational materials. Student-teacher ratios increased substantially as teachers abandoned education for other, more profitable sectors: during 1993 and 1994, for example, almost 8 percent of the country's teachers made this leap (although close to one-third would later return). (2004, p. 113)

Surprising some, the Cuban government maintained education as a cultural and fiscal priority, investing heavily in new teachers, the production of new materials and in the extension and expansion of *Educa a tu Hijo* (Teach Your Child) a pre-Kindergarten program founded in 1987, which supports parents in early childhood education (see Kirk 2008). Weakened by the economic crisis, the re-investment in education served a corollary purpose of re-entrenching the ideological underpinnings of the revolution within a public discourse increasingly disappointed with a government toiling under the profoundly disabling economic catastrophe that was the 1990s. Kapcia (2005) notes:

The same codes, somewhat downplayed in the late 1970s and 1980s, re-emerged out of the 1990s crisis and the Elián González campaign, to drive the post-2001 nationwide program of educational reform, with its explicit goal to reinforce the ideological (and therefore moral) impulse of the revolutionary process and to reinvigorate Cuba's youth as part of the current 'Battle of Ideas.' (p. 399)

The anxious excitement with which the capitalist world waits for Castro's death, alongside the assumption that a political transformation will occur from within, perhaps before the body is even cold, may have provoked an orchestrated tightening of the ranks which is expressed through the continued ideological content of Cuban education. Cubans do not see Fidel's imminent death as a bell tolling on the Revolution, and indeed the steady hand of his successor, President Raul Castro, demonstrates the institutionalized functioning of the government as a whole, rather than a reliance on one man and his iron grip. Although a common perception among many North Americans, the view that the end of the Castro brothers will signify the end of the Revolution, is more symbolic than substantive. Nevertheless, as Cuba continues with the uphill battle of economic recovery, as well as with its efforts to address the social imbalances created by the Special Period and its reforms, education continues to be the primary avenue through which the Revolution proves its valour to the Cuban people.

Despite criticism from some US scholars (for example Cruz-Taura 2003 and Blum 2008), the education system is by most accounts, back on track. Cuba devotes 10–11% of its GDP on education, an increase in total per student spending but a decrease in percentage of GDP. By way of comparison, this exceeds the 6% recommended by UNESCO and is generally high for the Caribbean and Latin American region (Gasperini 2008, p. 300). This also surpasses the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) leader, Denmark at 7%, and well exceeds the OECD average of 4.8% (OECD Family Database). Further, Cuban teachers recently received an across the board raise to improve teacher retention (Acosta 2009). It is worth stating again that the highly political educational content and purpose is by no means unique to Cuba, although due to its outlier status in ideological terms it may appear more transparent in Cuba than elsewhere.

The degree to which education secured the unequal power relations of capitalist Cuba corresponded quite powerfully to its central place as an early battle ground of the Revolution. It continues to powerfully serve the government as a tool for both hallowing the legend of its own successes, as well as for empowering its people with literacy and mathematical abilities which are, according to many, among the highest in the world (Carnoy & Marshall, Hunt 2003, Marquis 2001, the Task Force on Education, Equity, and Economic Competitiveness in Latin America & the Caribbean 2001, and Gasperini 2000).

The Evolution of Structure, Content and Policy in Cuban Education

The Revolutionary Government wants to convert Cuba to an industrialized country. Many industries will be created. Many workers will have jobs. Unemployment will end.

Sample paragraph from a reading evaluation exercise used during the Literacy Campaign (Kozol, 1978, Appendix)

While the Revolution transformed the content, delivery and accessibility of Cuban education, the structure of schooling remained and remains relatively similar to that in prerevolutionary times. Education is compulsory for children 6–15 years old, and is organized in to Primary (ages 6–11/12), Basic Secondary (ages 11/12–14/15), Technological Secondary (ages 14/15–18), and Upper Secondary, also called Pre-university (ages 14/15–18). As mentioned above, the ‘Educate Your/The Child’ program is a non-institutional pre-K program for parents, and there are as well various curricula developed for child-care centres across the island (both for children who attend while their parent(s) work(s) during the day and for children who are wards of the state). A second ministry, the Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for all post-secondary education, governing:

Policy in matters of undergraduate and postgraduate education. It controls teaching, methodology, courses and programmes and the allocation of student places, as well as the specialization courses offered by centres of higher education which come under the control of other ministries. (International Association of Universities, 2009)

In the Primary program, the same teacher remains with the same class from grade one through grade four, with another taking over for grades five and six. This allows, in theory, for pedagogical continuity from one year to the next. This process has the potential to fundamentally undermine the institutional processing of children and forefronts at the same time the unavoidable unevenness of child development to meet the diverse needs and trajectories of learners.

Basic Secondary is a three year compulsory program for all students. The content for both Primary and Basic Secondary is standardized nationally. Students who qualify (through grades or other measures) can go on to either Technological Secondary or Upper Secondary (Pre-University). The former is for studies relating to technological and professional education wherein students prepare to work in specific fields. Working in one of 122 polytechnic institutes around the country, students prepare for their chosen careers. Upper Secondary (pre-university), according to the Cuban Ministry of Education, “is aimed at training graduates with the general principles of the Martian [of the teachings of Jose Martí] notion of work, with an active participation in the construction and defence of the Cuban socialist project...” (2009). From here, students go onto higher education in fields of their choice, from social and earth sciences to law and medicine.

The content of Cuban education has been highly political throughout the past century. This is reflected not only in the near deification of national heroes such as Jose Martí, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and Antonio Maceo, but also in the heavy emphasis on technological and scientific education which came in response to the scarcity of Cuban scientific professionals

(from doctors and engineers, to chemists and biologists) at the beginning of the 1960s. In addition to a prerevolutionary reliance on foreign training and foreign professionals in these areas, many of Cuba's scientists left the island before, during and after the Revolution. This pragmatic educational response was a political departure from pre-revolutionary educational priorities.

Basic numeracy and literacy skills are of course at the core of K–10 schooling in Cuba. Like many North American models, K–10 education in Cuba involves a physical activity component, as well as basic home economics, social studies and civics. As mentioned above, within these foci comes content which is explicitly supportive of the political and social projects of the revolution. The following suggested arithmetic problems from a 1960s teacher handbook illustrate this approach:

- A family's bill for electricity used to be \$8 monthly, and after the reduction in rates ordered by the revolutionary government it is \$3 less. What is the family's present monthly expenditure for electricity?
- In record time the government printing office has printed 2 million "We Will Win" Literacy Booklets and one million "Let's Alphabetize" Teaching Manuals. Write these two quantities out in figures and indicate the total number of booklets and manuals printed for the literacy campaign undertaken by the Revolutionary Government. (Quoted in Fagen 1964, pp. 64 ,67)

Such examples, while clearly political, were also highly philosophical. The same manual explains the politics of such a blatantly political approach to curriculum:

... It is essential to get into the habit of scrutinizing social life objectively and quantitatively. It is not enough, for example, to know that every day many persons in the world die from hunger and from cold. We should know precisely as possible how many children, men and women are going hungry despite the fact that food surpluses exist. And not only should we know the world total, but also we should know what the proportion in each country is in order to arrive at intelligent conclusions and to explain to ourselves why these things happen and to what forces and interests they are subject. (from Fagen 1964, p. 60)

While teaching children about successes of the Revolution during a math lesson may appear overly political to some, teaching children about electricity prices as well as the scale of the nation's literacy project serves the material purpose of educating children about particular material realities of the world. With this in mind, the following arithmetic problems from the same manual point to these goals—it states:

- About two fifths of Cuba's cultivatable land is devoted to growing sugar cane. What fraction of arable Cuban land is used for other crops?
- The annual per capita income of Latin America is \$280. That of the United States, on the other hand, is more than \$2,000. What is the difference in per capita income between Latin America and the United States? To what do you attribute this contrast in wealth?
- If one can of chicken produced in China costs 40 cents, how much will we pay for 3 cans? (from Fagen 1964, pp. 65, 67)

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These questions in particular, might remind us of the powerful effects of the US Blockade on the Cuban economy. It is worth asking to what degree any curricular approach or philosophy works with the lived reality of students' lives and knowledges. The political struggle of Cuba is to a large degree the political struggle of Cubans. So while these questions may have an Orwellian flare to them, they nonetheless are dealing with issues that are alive and well in the lives of Cuban students. We need only consider the average (un)learnings of American children about Cuba to see that the Island is not alone in its invocation of education to situate students and knowledge in relation to their local and international surroundings, for better or worse.

In the mid 1960s, Cuba more explicitly embraced a Marxist-Leninist approach to education, and the divide between work and learning came increasingly under fire. Work, of all kinds, was emphasized as a noble and necessary element of supporting *La Patria* (the fatherland). The development of a love of work became a priority in order to challenge both the physical/mental binary as well as the historical divide between rural and urban Cuba. A fairly well known program, Cuba's Escuela al Campo (School in/to the Countryside, or EAC) sends Basic Secondary students from urban areas to rural areas for work-education placements aimed at developing both abilities and appreciations for work and work based learning. The EAC is linked to in-class learning which takes place before and after the trips to the campo. Denise Blum writes:

The classroom curriculum, in many ways, prepares students for the EAC. For example, in the mathematics textbooks, word problems use the agricultural context for learning arithmetic. In the civic education textbook, "El amor al trabajo" (the love for work) is a prominent theme; young people are portrayed as heroes in different types of work, including daily life—defending the *patria* (fatherland), in construction, sports, education, and culture. One photo [in a school text book] shows a teenager aiming an AK-47, and other pictures depict the young people active in the field experience. Another shows Che Guevara cutting cane. Under the pictures are statements such as "The defence of the socialist patria is the greatest honor and the supreme duty of every citizen," "Work in socialist society is a right, a duty and a motive of honor for every citizen," "Voluntary work, the cornerstone of our society," and "Che: The impulse for voluntary work in Cuba." (2008, p. 143)

This comes as part of a larger goal of eliminating barriers between schooling and work specifically, and between schooling and society more generally (Cheng and Manning 2003). This has brought the relationship between national economic trends (and requirements) into clearer focus.

This approach is heavily influenced by Marx, and specifically as Juan Marinello notes, Marx's (1875/1970) *Critique of the Gotha Program* which argues, among other things, for the combination of productive work with education (Castro 1975a, introduction.). Today, as part of the required curriculum, elementary students have 480 hours of work education (out of a total of 5,680) while students in Basic Secondary have 280 hours of labour education (of a total of 5,799) (Gasperini 2000, p. 17). This is supported today in curriculum documents from the elementary to the pre-university levels, wherein references to education and productive work in service to Cuban socialism are emphasized (see Ministerio De Educación 2005, 2008). One sixth-grade, labour education booklet features (with illustrated examples of each) such phrases as : "My

Parents do useful work,” “I Love my family,” “I work to take care of my body” (Ministerio de Educación 1988, p. 6, 5, 7). These pronouncements are buttressed by social correctives on working hard, not taking the toys of other children and treating the environment and animals with respect. The 60-page reader also features disparate diagrams of the body, pages on different forms of communication (this section is titled “How do we communicate?” and features illustrations of postal carriers mailing letters, operators speaking on phones, and journalists writing stories) (ibid p. 46). It also contains pages with isolated historical facts and quotes, as well as the dates of various holidays and multiple tributes to the Cuban flag. Labor education, in this document and elsewhere (see Ministerio de Educación 1992) is thus by no means a separate or even corollary aspect of schooling, but rather an integrated aspect of the curriculum which relates to social sciences, history and civics—and more abstractly to national morality and identity. Where in the US Christian context, cleanliness may be next to godliness, for Cuban sixth graders, cleanliness is next to Cubanidad—a contribution to the national project.

As mentioned above, immediately following the Revolution, a push to increase science education was needed. Subsequent to that, identified needs in agriculture and industry again determined the direction of educational policy. In the face of declining post-secondary enrolment, the Special Period saw yet another policy re-tooling with the necessary rise of tourism. Social insertion, the linking of students (well before graduation) with specific jobs and their subsequent placement in those jobs, became more difficult with fewer and fewer jobs. This impacted student understandings of the utility of school and inequality was exacerbated in the work force. Black students for example, were disproportionately displaced by/from education during the Special Period according Lourdes Perez Montalvo, who argues that since the Special Period, blacks have continue to be at the highest risk of being either out of school or unemployed (Montalvo 2009). Employment in the tourism sector increased tremendously, as demand in the sector grew (see Wood and Jayawardena 2003). One strategy for economic recovery has been the expansion of the private sector. Over the past 20 years, Cuba’s economy has increasingly relied upon a growing private sector. Between 1993 and 1996 the number of Cubans employed in the private sector increased 1300%, from 15,000 to almost 210,000 (Henken 2002, 6).

One key question which arises from looking at both pro-Cuba and anti-Cuba analyses, is the degree to which revolutionary education delivered on its promise of critical, Freirean-influenced pedagogy. While the Cuban Ministry of Education has long acknowledged the limitations of the banking model of education (see Borroto López 1999), and while any accurate application of Martí’s or Che’s educational philosophy would necessarily involve critical problem-posing pedagogy over rote learning (on Martí, see Foner 1979; and on Che, see McLaren 2000) the degree to which students are indeed taught to think critically and to which teachers are required to stick to the official script is difficult to determine. While there is no shortage of critical Cuban education scholarship and educational scholarship citing the works of Vygotsky, Freire and others, the degree to which policy-level theory trickles down to the classroom is another matter (see Hernández 1997, González 1995, Rico 1996, Rico y Hidalgo 1997, and Ministerio de Educación 1998). Similarly, in the late 1990s teacher training curriculum was heavily constructivist (see Zilberstein and Silvestre 1997, Hernández 1997, and Rico and Silvestre 1987) but it remains is difficult to assess how clear and effective the transition from theory to practice might be.

Alongside workplace oriented purposes of Cuba’s educational system is the socio-political identity formation which happens in Cuban schools. In addition to the focus on basics

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and labour, the development of the moral character of the Cuban individual (the socio-political development of the student) is the other piece of the Cuban educational puzzle. Cheng and Manning write "... these [education] policies relied on a strong moral sense: they were intended to realize social equity, especially in terms of eliminating the division between city and countryside, elites and commoners, and mental and physical labour" (2003, p. 360). Literacy, numeracy and the intentional melding of the work/learning paradigm come in mutual service to the development of patriotic, socialist citizens committed to the defence of the fatherland and the Revolution. An essay question from a Basic Secondary examination asks students, "Why should we be like Che? What are the lessons he has taught you personally about your duties to your fellow Cubans and the Revolution?" (Castillano 2008, p. 2) Another asks, "Are we winning the Battle of Ideas? Explain your answer with objective examples" (ibid). Although we can presume to know at least the general leaning of the correct answer to the latter, these are not simply regurgitation questions. The students are being asked to reflect. It is, perhaps like all reflexivity, intended to take place within certain confines, but it is reflection nonetheless. Critical thinking as well as the praxis which the work/study program is intended to provoke, thus takes place within the discursive parameters of revolutionary discourse in Cuban education. To whatever degree the prescribed Cuban individual is to emerge from a process of consideration, it is in this vehicle of political reflexivity which he is to travel along the road to national identity fulfilment. This is not to suggest identity is formed this way exclusively, as indeed there are many prescribed paths to identity as well, but rather that if any official discursive path to identity formation exists, it is meant to follow these directions.

The function of schooling as far as identity formation is by no means a covert practice or purpose of education. The Revolutionary Government was and is explicitly attendant to the project of social transformation, which necessarily involves re-education via formal and informal schooling. An early revolutionary statement on education puts it plainly:

[Educational training] involved furnishing or refurnishing the minds of the students with the historical, ideological and political images which the regime felt were appropriate to the new social order. This was attempted within the formal framework of the teacher-student relationship. The crucial point is that the citizenship was taught as a subject matter just as reading and writing were taught. (from Fagen, 1964, p. 12)

Educational content thus included the political education received by students, and this remains true today. In the Cuban context, this is nothing short of an intentional refashioning and application/development of hegemony. Ernesto Che Guevara (1964) argued that within the pedagogical life of the Revolution, one would never "wonder what you should be doing. You will simply do what at the time seems to make the most sense" (Quoted in Holst 2009, 3). This approach was enriched by the broad purview assigned to the Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Education. The latter is charged with directing not only K-12 education, but also overseeing the country's leading cultural institutions, including the National Theatre, the National Council of Culture, the National Publishing House and the National Institute of Art (de la Fuente 2001, p. 285). The broad reach of the Ministry enabled it to exercise powerful influence over the cultural politics and the political culture of the island, controlling much of the social infrastructure in support of the revolutionary project. If we accept the notion that all education has political content and works toward political and social goals, the explicit expression of these purposes must be commended when compared to the silence conferred on

such matters by governments who choose to conceal these educational aims. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus (one's unconscious preferences, dispositions, tendencies as well physical and mental habits) formal schooling is thus a part of an attempt to penetrate the a priori cultural formation of the child—what Toni Morrison refers to as “the structure that transparently and invisibly permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world” (1992, 17). The powerful and intentional construction of a universal (or at least national) common sense is not unique to Cuba, however its explicit expression by Che Guevara, The Ministry of Education and teachers on the ground is rare.

Conclusion

For those who learned to read and write during the campaign, and for those who do so in Cuban schools today, literacy and numeracy are powerfully linked to specific political content. While this is not unique to Cuba, the relatively recent establishment of a universal nationalized curriculum provides a remarkably discrete period for analysis in which specific ideological objectives were disseminated in a highly transparent way. This article has sketched the politics and content of revolutionary education in Cuba over the past half century, arguing that in effect, the literacy campaign has never ended and indeed continues in earnest today. Working with the notion of literacy, broadly conceived, this article argues the campaign was the vanguard political project, disseminating specific knowledge, specific readings of that knowledge, and specific lenses for future learning. Following the adage that to give a person a fish is to feed her for a day, while to teach her to fish is to feed her for life, Cubans were indeed taught to fish but only for particular fish in particular waters.

A different sort of indoctrination proceeds in Cuban classrooms than that found in their US counterparts. Where in both contexts the ideals of the Republic are proclaimed sacred truths, select men proclaimed heroes of historical present, and symbols of nation stand in where otherwise question marks might linger, *nation* is conceived in the Cuban context as an ongoing and collective project, in flux, fluid and unfolding. Indeed the socialist ideals (as mandatory as Americans' belief in the US system) that inform the content, structure and trajectory of Cuban education are commonly misunderstood as uniquely dictatorial, authoritarian or fascistic. Such arguments are usually free from the traditional constraints of logic, fact and experience. Indeed through both tacit and explicit methods all education is a political act. A more important consideration is the degree to which the politics of a given education system recognize, support and improve the lived reality (historically, currently and going forward) of the communities it serves.

The individual fortunate enough to spend time in a Cuban school notices that despite having one of the world's smallest per capita GDP, Cuban children have eyeglasses on their faces, braces on their teeth and frequently smiles on their faces. Traveling from school to school the same individual notices that there is relatively little difference in resources from one school to the next (there are no private schools for Cubans); that there are no elementary or secondary schools that can be rightly termed black schools, or white schools; and that despite tremendous obstacles, the Cuban government has maintained a deep and consistent commitment to education. All of this is to say that the socialist rhetoric of the official curriculum resonates powerfully with the lived reality of many students and other school community members. Indeed it is far less rhetorical than visions of the American dream distributed in underprivileged schools, to underprivileged children who are statistically guaranteed underprivileged lives in the US.

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