



## CUBA by Daniele Vidoni

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### Overview

The Cuban case is rather unusual, because it is a striking example of a society with *no* freedom of education. This tightly controlled society with limited choices has, however, been able to set up an effective school system, especially by comparison with some other Latin American countries.

Looking at the history of education in Cuba, it is possible to compare the present data with the information available for the Batista period. In 1953 - at the beginning of Castro's quest for power (the Revolution would not actually take place until 1959) - 55.6 percent of the children aged 6-14 did not have access to a school, there were more than one million illiterate people (22.3 percent of the population 10 to 49 years of age), primary education was available only to half of the population, middle and higher education available only to restricted minorities in the major urban centers, and there were an estimated 10,000 unemployed teachers.

Since the advent of his authoritarian regime, Castro and his entourage have included education among the primary political instruments and also objectives of the state. According to official data, 98 percent of Cuban children of the appropriate age attended pre-school in 1997-98. The enrolment rate for 6 to 16-year-olds was 94.2

percent, and primary school enrolment was 100 percent. Grade-repetition rates were 1.9 percent in primary school, 2.8 percent in secondary and 1,8 percent in pre-university school.

The result is even more remarkable if compared to the achievements obtained by the other Latin American and Caribbean countries. The results of Cuban student with regard to language achievement in third grade are superior to those of any other country in the area.

Part of the Cuban achievement success is due to its peculiar situation: Cuba is a small country (11 million people) that - until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 - received heavy subsidies from the Soviets. These arrangements saved Cuba from the recession the rest of Latin America suffered in the 1980s, and allowed the Cuban government to invest high shares of the GDP in education - around 10 percent, a much higher percentage than the 6 percent recommended as adequate by UNESCO.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the size of GDP allocated to education alone is insufficient to define an effective education system, but the system's strict centralization implies that the Ministry, which decides the system's objectives, allocates all the money. This arrangement makes it possible to distribute money efficiently, without "informational advantages of self-interested agents . . . [that] can create adverse incentives and leeway for the agents to act opportunistically, leading to an inefficient use of given resources and to misallocations of resources across different uses."<sup>2</sup> When the subsidies from the former Soviet Union ceased, the Cuban economy risked collapse; it is now slowly starting to breathe again by attracting massive numbers of European and now U.S. tourists bucking the embargo.

However, this situation is posing two new burdens on the quality of Cuban education. On one side, the economic crisis has meant a serious shortage of education materials - such as textbooks and notebooks - that in the past have been widely available; on the other side, it poses a serious threat to the availability of the most important resource inside the school, well trained and qualified teachers. Carnoy notes that, until recently, teaching was a relatively prestigious profession, and wages (about 300-450 pesos per month, or \$US13-18) are only somewhat lower than those of physicians and about the same as in other professions. This situation ensured the Cuban government a steady supply of potentially talented teachers, attracted to teaching mainly on the basis of wanting to work with children and adolescents in a relatively prestigious job. "Now this situation has changed, particularly in two provinces, Habana and Mantanzas, the centers of the rapidly growing tourist industry. Tourists can only pay in U.S. dollars, and a parallel dollar economy has developed in the two provinces. Workers in hotels, transportation, and restaurants receive tips in dollars, and can use these dollars to purchase goods not available to other Cubans in special foreign currency stores. A chambermaid in a hotel, for example, may earn \$30-50 dollars in tips per month (or more), double or triple a teacher's salary. Ironically, the

competition from tourist industry jobs has drawn off highly skilled labor from teaching, creating shortages in the teaching force.”<sup>3</sup>

The next few years will be crucial to understanding whether the Cuban system will or will not be able to overcome these growing difficulties. However, the example of a system that provides a rigid structure for family and youth choices plays the role of a devil’s advocate in any attempt to promote and defend the role of freedom in education, and it raises important questions on the essence and the aims of education:

“In the Cuban restricted choice model, educational ‘success’ is part of that rigid structure: the state ‘requires’ children to be as successful in school as their ability permits.”<sup>4</sup> What is the meaning of “education” in a society where individual self-definition is limited by such a heavy structure?

Does such education just lead to a dystopia where a small group of people decide the essence and the value of the human life?

And, in more practical terms, will government continue to monopolize Cuban education? If not, who will be able to partner with government? NGOs? Private education entities?

Can Cuba maintain the coherence of its education policies in the absence of historically strong state guidance and control?

What features of the rigid Cuban structure might more democratic countries adopt for enhancing the effectiveness of their schools?

## *The legal framework*

In Cuba, schooling is a function of the state; this fundamental principle is affirmed by article 9 of the 1992 *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*. The article reads: “The state . . . ensures the educational, scientific, technical and cultural progress of the country . . . [and] as the power of the people and for the people, guarantees . . . that no child be left without schooling, food and clothing; that no young person be left without the opportunity to study; that no one be left without access to studies, culture and sports.” Article 39, 40, 51 and 52 also refer to education; article 39 and 40 are the basic guidelines for educational policy, and article 51 and 52 affirm the right to education.

Specifically, article 39 indicates that “the state orients, foments and promotes education, culture and science in all their manifestations.” Educational and cultural policy are based on a set of comprehensive and extremely detailed principles. The first is that “the state bases its educational and cultural policy on the progress made in science and technology, the ideology of Marx and Mart, and universal and Cuban progressive pedagogical tradition;” this principle goes along with the assertion that “the state promotes the patriotic and communist education of the new generations and the training of children, young people and adults for social life.” Education is a tool for the advancement of the Cuban society, and its outcomes are especially devoted to the solution of social problems. “The state encourages and facilitates research and gives priority to that which is aimed at solving the problems related to the interests of society and the well-being of the people; the state makes it possible for the workers to engage in scientific work and to contribute to the development of science; the state promotes, foments and develops all forms of physical education and sports as a means of education and of contribution to the integral development of citizens; . . . the state promotes the participation of the citizens, through the country’s social and mass organizations, in the development of its educational and cultural policy.”

Article 40 specifies that children are the first beneficiaries of the outcomes of these principles; in fact, “the state and society give special protection to children and young people. It is the duty of the family, the schools, the state agencies and the social and mass organizations to pay special attention to the integral development of children and young people.”

Chapter VII, Fundamental Rights, Duties and Guarantees, specifies how the right to education is guaranteed. Article 51 says that “everyone has the right to education. This right is guaranteed by the free and widespread system of schools, semi-boarding and boarding schools and scholarships of all kinds and at all levels of education and because of the fact that all educational material is provided free of charge, which gives all children and young people, regardless of their family’s economic position, the opportunity to study in keeping with their ability, social demands and the needs of socioeconomic development. Adults are also guaranteed this right; education for them is free of charge and with the specific facilities regulated by law, by means of the adult education program, technical and vocational education, training courses in state agencies and enterprises and the advanced courses for workers.”

Furthermore, article 52 indicates that “everyone has the right to physical education, sports and recreation. Enjoyment of this right is assured by including the teaching and practice of physical education and sports in the curricula of the national educational system; and by the broad nature of the instruction and means placed at the service of the people, which makes possible the practice of sports and recreation on a mass basis.”

These principles are realized through the *Sistema Nacional de Educacion*, the Cuban School System, which relies on a core of laws: resolution 210 (April 23, 1975), resolution 654 (October 21, 1976), resolution 656 (October 21, 1976), resolution 160 (March 17, 1981) and resolution 430 (July 24, 1981).

These laws are accountable for the features that have made the Cuban school system so strict, specific and, eventually, successful. First, the state is the only entity that can operate schools, but the entire society is required to participate in the educational process by receiving at least primary and lower secondary education, and by direct support of the schools' work through the family, the state agencies, and the social and mass organizations. Second, the only permitted form of education is co-education, on the basis of the principle that males and females should have access to the same facilities. Third, education is free; the State provides all educational material free of charge, and maintains a widespread system of schools, semi-boarding and boarding schools and scholarships of all kinds and at all levels of education.

A peculiarity of the Cuban school system - especially because of its widespread application - is the combination of school and work. This principle is directly derived from José Martí's theories, and it calls for the need of linking theory and practice, school with life, and teaching with production, and gives a reasonable explanation for the success of the system. In fact, "since Cuban education had been functioning at a reasonably high standard since the 1970s, secondary school average students received a higher level of math, science, and language training, which they brought with them into teacher education. By training these student-teachers in government-run pedagogical institutes to teach a well-designed national curriculum, the Ministry of Education could deliver reasonably 'good' teachers trained to teach the required curriculum to every school in Cuba, even rural schools in provinces distant from the capital, Habana."<sup>5</sup>

### *Freedom to establish non-state schools*

Article 39 of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba states that "education is a function of the state." On the basis of this principle, non-state schools are illegal in Cuba.

### *Homeschooling*

Article 39 further specifies that "the law . . . [establishes] the integration and structure of the national system of education and the extent of compulsory education and

defines the minimum level of general education that every citizen should acquire. In order to make this principle a reality, general education and specialized scientific, technical or artistic education are combined with work, development research, physical education, sports, participation in political and social activities and military training.” Said education may be acquired only through schooling in one of the state schools; home schooling is illegal.

### *School choice not limited by family income*

As already stated, article 39 of the Constitution states that schooling is provided free of charge; this statement holds at all levels but it is only valid for the state schools because these are the only institutions that can legally provide the schooling service.

### *School distinctiveness protected by law and policy*

#### *Decisions about admitting pupils*

All Cuban pupils attend state schools, and admission to the local school is automatic at the age of six. The burden this provision sets on the government is high because almost 75 percent of the six year old children live in the cities, and that only 25 percent of the schools are urban schools; in Cuba 4792 primary schools (53.6 percent of the total) serve less than 50 students each. Following the demands made by UNICEF and UNESCO, the Cuban government has started programs like “Educa a tu Hijo” (give your child an education). These programs try to involve the family and the community in infants’ early education, so that children enter the school “ready to learn.”<sup>6</sup>

#### *Decisions about staff*

The *ley de Nacionalización de la Enseñanza* (June 6, 1961) (law on the nationalization of the teaching profession) declared that the teaching function is public, and its service is free. This law established that the state exercises the teaching function as a non-transferable duty and as a right of all Cuban citizens, without distinctions or privileges, in accordance with the principles of the Revolution. This law carries- out article 51 of the Cuban Constitution that requires the protection of the right to education by creating a “free and widespread system of schools, semi-

boarding and boarding schools and scholarships of all kinds and at all levels of

education.”

One interesting feature of the Cuban system is the *emergentes*. The *emergentes* are bright upper secondary school students with the promise of receiving a university degree in humanities while teaching in primary school; these students receive six to eight months of teacher education courses, and then become elementary school teachers. *Emergentes* sign up for five years of teaching, taking courses for their university degrees on Saturdays and during the school vacations. As noted by Carnoy, “the conversion of lower secondary education into a ‘continuation’ of the primary school model is also using *emergente* training. This involves a one-year teacher education course and close supervision once in the classroom by their teachers college mentor.”<sup>7</sup> Although in the first year of practice the *emergentes* are not necessarily successful teachers, they learn fast, and they are soon able to produce results in terms of student achievement. This characteristic way of linking together theory and practice provides a large number of bright and motivated prospective teachers who can be sent to any school in the country. Such arrangement means, on one side, that also the rural schools are served with talented and trained professionals (however young they may be) and, on the other side, it provides a possible solution for the teacher shortage that may result from the present very difficult economic situation.

### *Accountability for school quality*

The creation of an accountability system for Cuban schools is one of the results of the enactment of the reforms established in the decade 1972 - 1981. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the entire system, and it carries out the periodical evaluation school quality and of teachers’ and students’ results through the *Instituto Central de Ciencias Pedagógicas* (Central Institute of Pedagogical Science) and on the Central office of Planning, Statistics, and School Inspection. Local authorities also take part in the evaluation process as local representatives of the Ministry.

Such strict system design aims at the constant improvement of educational quality. Evaluation is based on a participatory approach designed to detect and correct problems of poor educational process and achievement through a comprehensive set of indicators.

The introduction of the so called *entrenamiento metodológico conjunto* (joint methodological training) identifies the class as the central focus of the evaluation process carried out by the *estructuras de dirección docente-metodológicas* (directive structures of teaching methodology) and by the school. This joint action allows for

systematic control over the teaching-learning process, with regard both to students' results and to teaching methods.

Resolution 216 (June 7, 1989) is the framework on the basis of which Cuban teachers assess their students' achievements; the tools for carrying out the assessment process are standardized tests, in class or take home exams, or specific performance in practical activities designed by the teacher. Standardized tests determine promotion, entrance to specific secondary schools, and access to specific majors within each university. Standardized tests have been used traditionally also used to determine access to primary school, however "Cuba . . . experienced a serious 'bottleneck' effect as students entering the first grade were unable to pass the standardized exam.

The Ministry of Education recently revised the exam policy to be more consistent with early childhood education principles, eliminating this entrance requirement for first grade."<sup>8</sup> The exam still remains a requirement for entrance into second grade and higher.

Student achievement, diligence, and punctuality are (together with the teacher's diligence, punctuality, commitment, and mastery of the disciplinary contents taught) the objects of the teacher assessment process. A teacher's career growth depends primarily on positive evaluations in these areas; moreover, failure in leading the students to norm results may mean cuts in the teachers' salaries. Continuous evaluation is considered a part of the teachers' professional development because it provides useful information to improve teaching practice through action research and life-long learning; in fact one of the formative outcomes of the evaluation process are recommendations for *planes de superación autodidacta o postgraduada* (teachers' self-development plans).

The teacher evaluation process is carried out mainly through inspections. As described by Gasperini, "the 'chief of the pedagogical unit' (*jefe de círculo pedagógico*) visits every teacher each month during classes, assesses his/her activities and addresses any problems detected, deciding, for example on in-service training needed for teachers in different areas. A 'municipal specialist in teaching methods' (*metodólogos municipales*) helps the school address pedagogical problems. If a problem cannot be solved with the 'metodólogos,' the Instituto de Capacitación Pedagógica gets involved. Administrative and pedagogical inspectors set deadlines by which time problems must be solved. Assessment takes place at all levels of the system: the nation assesses the province, the province assesses the municipality, and the municipality the school. Teachers' performance is assessed by the school director, the party, the union, the Organization of Young Communists, and the 'pedagogical



guide' for each cycle (preprimary, primary, secondary).”<sup>9</sup>

The Cuban approach to accountability implies that test results can translate directly into action toward the teachers, “but this action comes directly from the educational bureaucracy, not from parents, who have little school choice or voice. Interestingly, it is the hierarchical bureaucratic system that seems to be able to translate the information into more effective education than systems relying on indirect market mechanisms.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Teaching of values*

As indicated in Article 39 of the Constitution, the objectives of the education system are indicated and shaped around the Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Specifically, the system seeks to educate the citizen to “assume its most basic social duties, . . . [it] educate[s] this being to produce material and spirituals goods that will serve society in a way that every human being participates in material production, in order to eliminate the contradiction among school and society, producer and consumers, intellectual work and physical work, and among cities and rural areas.”<sup>11</sup>

## *Endnotes*

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<sup>1</sup> Ritzen 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop and Woessmann 2002, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Carnoy and others, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Carnoy and others, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Carnoy and others, 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Educación para todos*, 13, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Carnoy and others, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Lindahl, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Gasperini, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Carnoy and others, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Garcia Gallo, 62.

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