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CHILDREN ARE OUR NATURAL RESOURCE: IMPRESSIONS OF DAY CARE IN CUBA

by

Honey Schnapp

Un pueblo de hombres educados sera siempre un pueblo de hombres libres. (A nation of educated people will always be a nation of free people.) -- Jose Marti

In December 1988, I was among a group of early childhood educators who traveled to Cuba for ten days to study the day care system there. We had different backgrounds and training, we came from different parts of the country and we had different expectations of what we would find. We came away with varied views and images but all of us now share and deeply feel the Cubans' great love for their children.

Not having been out of the United States for many years, I wasn't sure what to expect. My initial and sometimes surprising impressions left me feeling that in many ways life in Cuba is similar to life here -- people wait for buses, go to work, eat ice cream, go to the theater. In many ways it is different -- there are no malls or billboard ads, and old Chevys, of 1950's vintage, speed through the streets by the dozen. I learned of more significant similarities and differences throughout my stay. Day care centers, clinics and affordable housing are being built by volunteer labor everywhere and people pay about twelve cents for a bus ride. There are lovely neighborhoods as well as shabby neighborhoods, but even the most run down areas were not scary, as there are virtually no crimes of violence nor drugs. It was clear to me, however, that Cuba is very different than is generally portrayed by our media.

Cuba is a country of 10 million people. Approximately one fifth of them live in Havana, where our trip was based. The island, located just 90 miles from Key West, Florida, is about the size and population of Pennsylvania.

The two most profound events in recent Cuban history that have helped shape life in that country have been the Revolution thirty years ago, when Fidel Castro came to power, and the trade blockade by the U.S., which began in 1962 and continues to severely hamper the Cubans' economic growth and stability. It is a struggling nation, relying heavily on hard work and dedication to compensate for its economic limitations.

The most impressive aspect of Cuba's day care system is that it is a national priority implemented by a national policy. The Cubans' concern for education has been a part of their culture for three decades.

One of the first goals of the Revolution was literacy. In 1961 a national effort was launched -- the Literacy Campaign. Brigadistas (teenagers who went into the countryside to teach people how to read) set out with their books and lanterns. The lantern became the symbol of the campaign, dubbed the "Light of Learning." After a day of working in the

fields, the peasants, who lived in areas without electricity, would begin their studies with the assistance of young brigadistas and their lantern light. From then to the present, resources for education have been seen as an important investment; in 1958, approximately 79 million pesos were spent as contrasted to nearly 1.7 billion in 1985. Currently, 23% of the national budget supports education. The illiteracy rate has gone from 23% in 1961 down to 3%.

Learning is given great respect as demonstrated by the two museums in Havana that are dedicated to education. Both the Education Museum and the Literacy Museum exhibit Cuba's history as well as the leaders and philosophers of education. The museum guide who proudly referred to the Cuban children as "our national resource" expressed the essence of the country's educational philosophy.

After the Revolution, the Federation of Cuban Women established the Institute of Childhood which organized day care programs across the island. The original facilities were former mansions that had been abandoned by the wealthy who fled the country after the Revolution. In 1974, the first new buildings, designed especially for day care centers, were planned and built by the Institute of Childhood. Every five years the design is evaluated by a team of educators, doctors, psychologists and architects to determine how to improve the physical environment for young children. Their analysis becomes the plan for the new structures. Currently, there are 1000 *circulo infantiles* (day care centers) in Cuba, 500 of them in Havana. Fifty new centers are built each year, primarily by volunteer labor.

In the mid 1970's there was another change in day care. The Institute of Childhood was incorporated into the Ministry of Education, creating a comprehensive educational system, dedicated to creating universal day care. The Ministry oversees the implementation of educational policy from the *circulos* through the college system.

Structure and Goals of Day Care

For children from the age of 45 days to four years, day care is available at the *circulo infantiles*. The fifth year at the *circulo* is called *prescolar*. (Our guide became confused by our use of the word preschool. For Cubans it is literally the year before primary grade school.) Centers are open from 6:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m., six days a week.

It was quite apparent to us that the Cubans place a major emphasis on health and cleanliness in their day care centers. Each *circulo* has a clinic where a nurse is on duty for routine care and a doctor makes a weekly visit. Dental workers come twice a year to clean the children's teeth and give fluoride treatments; however, children who need fillings are taken to the dentist by center staff. A toothbrush for each child is part of the bathroom decor. Individual medical files are kept at the *circulo*. The children begin each morning with an exercise period, in addition to the physical education activities throughout the week. When children arrive at the *circulo* they are changed into school clothing -- lightweight cotton smocks and shorts. During the morning children are bathed and again changed into clean clothes. Lines of richly colored clothing hanging in the sun were our first glimpse of a *circulo* as the garments are washed and ironed on the premises.

Nutrition education is also strongly emphasized. Not only is it reflected in the center's own food preparation, but nutrition awareness is a visible part of parent education and the curriculum. In one center, many of the teacher-made materials were part of a nutrition display including cut-outs of "happy" and "sad" carrots. These are used to encourage the young eaters to concentrate on quality foods. Elaborate meals are prepared at the *circulos*. In addition to lunch, there are "hard" snacks, consisting of little pieces of meat, fish, yogurt, ice cream or milk, and "soft" snacks, fruit or bread and butter. Each *circulo* has a parent room, with information and guidelines available on a variety of child rearing issues, including nutritional charts and recreation and bedtime suggestions.

Parents play an active role in the *circulos*. They are expected to be available for the "adaptation" period of their child, which is individually determined. At home they carry out the routines promoted by the center regarding meals and bedtimes. A Council of Parents at the center is made up of representatives from each age group, whose function is to deal with parent issues and physical plant problems.

On our last day, we visited a one year old *circulo*. In the entrance courtyard was an enormous bouquet of flowers, sent by a local trade union to celebrate the center's first anniversary. We learned that every *circulo* is sponsored by a workplace organization, which may provide resources or build things for the center and sets up exchange visits. It seems to reinforce the idea that children are everybody's concern.

The goals of day care in Cuba reflect the priorities and values of the country. The Cubans are engaged on all levels in building a society where people have a respect for work, are responsible and have self-discipline and a collective consciousness. Day care is part of that plan to develop a new society and a new person. One day a week the children engage in collective work as part of the curriculum. They might pick up leaves in the yard or, as we saw at *Ano de Mujeres Internacionales*, a school for deaf and hard of hearing children, plant a garden.

Not only does day care provide an enriching experience for children, a second priority is "to liberate women so they can become an active part of the productive work force," according to Clementina Serra, former director of the National Program of Childcare Centers. The Cubans maintain that in doing so the entire community benefits. To this end, families are eligible for infant care at a *circulo* when their child is 45 days old.

Third, day care in Cuba prepares children for life as well as for school. According to the Ministry of Education, the entire educational system aims at "developing the personality of children for their future involvement in society." While goals such as these may be evident in the centers we know in this country, my impression is that their emphasis is derived from a different premise -- that childhood is part of the thread of life rather than a state of development that one leaves to join adult society.

Another thing that differs from our perspective on day care is that there is a uniform philosophy governing the teaching of children. Analysis of theory and practice are multidisciplinary and the changes recommended as a result are implemented nationwide. Similar to our programs, however, is the fact that there is variation in the interpretation of

theory from center to center and inconsistency in its implementation due, in part, to the difficulty in training the teachers whose experience and style predates Cuba's current educational philosophy. There is constant analysis and reevaluation of this philosophy on many levels.

As stated by the Ministry of Education spokesperson with whom we met, their curriculum is based on "an integral combination of physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic activities in accordance with the particular characteristics of each age." Their developmental approach is strictly adhered to; for example, the schedule for all three year olds (or fours or fives) is the same throughout the country. Their major emphasis is on dramatic (real life) play. Set up throughout the *circulos* (the use of outdoor space year-round helps extend the classroom) are activity areas such as a clinic, barber shop, or grocery store. While there are many representative and teacher-made props, there are times when improvisation is specifically encouraged. In the play "clinic" that we saw set up, there were realistic medicine bottles, a cot and telephone, but a jump rope had been attached to the cot to be used as a stethoscope. This type of skill development is an example of preparation for the practical aspects of life in Cuba. When our tour guide was asked how the Cubans kept the 1950's Chevys running, he explained that people invent the parts they need using their "imagination."

An additional focus is on language development, through storytelling. Not only are stories told for pure enjoyment, but as we observed in one *circulo*, where a teacher manipulated a puppet, they are used as the motivational introduction for math or "sensorial" (perceptual) activities. However, to our surprise, there were few books in the classrooms for three and four year olds, and other than the special needs school we visited, few written words were visible. I had brought children's picture books as gifts for the schools we visited but the school administrators accepted them awkwardly. Later we learned that the Cubans strongly believe in not exposing children to things they are not ready to master. We had an opportunity to meet with Franklin Martinez, renowned early childhood psychologist, who phrased it this way, "Our goal is to enrich development, not accelerate it."

Teacher Training

How teachers know what is appropriate for children comes from their extensive training. After 9th grade, students may decide to pursue a career in education. At that time they are evaluated based on the qualities of a good teacher, which is considered to be a special talent. According to the Ministry of Education, a good teacher is someone "who is a good citizen, a good person and is able to communicate. Ideally, they should be loved by people and be able to convey a love for what (and whom) they are teaching."

If a student pursues teaching, he or she undergoes four years of pre-university training, then two university years. The Salvador Allende Teacher Training School, one of several in the nation, is located outside Havana and boards 3200 high school-aged students from the province. There they study educational theory, psychology, methodology and practical courses such as guitar instruction as well as a regular course of study including math, language, literature and linguistics.

Teachers are viewed with high regard in this society and we had the opportunity to experience this first-hand during our visit. While we were meeting at the Ministry of Education loud drum beats could be heard from the street. Coincidentally, a parade was taking place outside in honor of the country's teachers and the debt of gratitude they are owed in Cuba. Several students spoke to the large assembled crowd as others waved banners. On several occasions during our trip people would learn that we were teachers. The response was the same from the server in our hotel to someone we met in a store. A serious look would cross his or her face before saying, "*Muy importante, muy importante!*" As in the United States, salaries in Cuba depend on the years of experience, level of schooling, and level of the position (whether one has local or national responsibility) but we were amazed to learn that teachers in Cuba are paid in the same range as doctors.

Visit to a CDR

One of the most powerful moments of the trip was a visit to a CDR (Committee in Defense of the Revolution -- a political block association) in a small town outside of Havana. After talking with us awhile and toasting us with rum and *creme de menthe*, the members of the CDR, virtually all the residents of this neighborhood, brought us to see their volunteer project. Everyone in Cuba does volunteer work, usually helping to build clinics, schools or housing. By this time it was 10:30 p.m. We walked the rubble-laden street covered with the remains of the shacks they had torn down in order to build. As we approached the site, we were struck twice by surprise. For one thing, their project was to build a *circulo*. Second, people were there, working by lantern light. We learned that this group of old and young, men and women, worked through the night. Some people even worked 14 hour shifts to finish building this center that would serve over 200 children. They were trying to meet a self-imposed deadline to complete this *circulo* by the anniversary of the Revolution, one week away. Although these centers are usually completed in two or three months, theirs took just one month to build. The people from town gathered around us and talked about the town's history and their volunteer project. Everyone seemed proud to have contributed to the *circulo* and cared about the families who would be served by it. It was a moving experience when we thought about the possibilities for humankind when the commitment to care and provide is in place.

The Cubans are involved in a process of developing quality, universal day care. From our observations and from their own analysis, they are still short of their goals. They would like to see more centers and more equipment, additional work done on language development and activities that stimulate creativity and imagination, and better training that lessens the gap between educational theory and practice.

There are many things that we take for granted as basic in our centers that we didn't see in Cuba, such as blocks, books, and a wide array of manipulative materials. Whether this is due to philosophical differences or the lack of resources (in large part a direct result of the U.S. embargo) is difficult to determine. However, it was obvious to us that the Cubans are firmly dedicated to establishing a universal, quality day care system and are, as a people and government, deeply committed to their children. Their achievements attest to this: continuity of care from infants to kindergarten, equality of care -- the doctors' children go to the same centers as the waiters', comprehensive medical and dental care,

parent and community involvement, security and liberation for working women, and racial integration.

Much can be gained by continued exchange with Cuba; they can learn from our sophisticated materials and techniques, while we learn from their society how to truly show that children are our national resource.
