‘One Huge School’: The Educational Impact of the Cuban Revolution

Rosi Smith

‘To be educated is the only way to be free’ – José Martí

The 1990s were dark times for Cuba. The fall of socialism in Europe meant more than political isolation in the face of a global consensus that declared bipolar history to be at an end. It meant hunger, atrophy and want.

Losing its trading partner and economic support, the Cuban economy collapsed. GDP fell 35% (Figueroa 1995:120), foreign trade 85% (Wilkinson 2011), and the US government seized the perceived opportunity to hasten the end of Fidel Castro’s leadership by tightening the blockade (Bas 2006:65). The years that became known as the ‘Special Period’¹ were characterised by a darkness not only figurative but literal, with power cuts leaving electricity available only a couple of hours each day (Brenner et al. 2008:277). After relative prosperity and economic equality, Cubans faced a crisis affecting every aspect of daily life: transport ground to a standstill as petrol ran out; fertilisers were unavailable; medical supplies ran perilously low; citizens spent on average fifteen hours a week queuing for basics (Cole 2005:50); and thousands lost their sight from malnutrition (World Health Organisation 2006).

It is noteworthy, then, that education spending increased during the 1990s, as a proportion of, an admittedly diminishing, GDP (Gasperini 2000:28). Fidel Castro repeatedly emphasised that not one school was closed (even in rural areas where the Revolution’s guarantee of education for all meant some schools had only a handful of students (Blum 2014:423)). As Special Period hardships attenuated, moreover, and the economy struggled towards recovery, education was an immediate priority. In the early 2000s, class sizes were reduced to twenty in primary and fifteen in secondary (Carnoy et al. 2007:32), massive investment was put into accelerated teacher training and ‘universalisation’ saw universities opened up to unprecedented numbers, most studying part time in their own communities (Colectivo de Autores 2006). Cuba’s commitment to education as an alienable social good and a force for global development was underlined by the formation in 2005 of the Latin American School for Medicine. This institution has

¹ The ‘Special Period in Time of Peace’ placed Cuba on a war footing to deal with a peacetime crisis.

trained, for free, more than 23,000 doctors from across the world, on condition that they return to practise medicine in disadvantaged communities in their own nations (MEDICC website).

Placing education ahead of arguably more pressing material concerns may seem surprising, even unwise, to external observers, but is consistent with policy throughout the revolutionary period. Along with free universal healthcare, education has been a lauded success of the Revolution. While high-quality analyses published in the early years, (e.g. Fagen (1969) and Gillette (1972)), have been scant in subsequent decades, the basic facts are clear. Its achievements – primary and basic secondary enrolments of more than 99% (*Anuario Estadístico de Cuba* 2004); 99.8% literacy (world.bymap.org); language and maths scores outstripping most rich nations (Gasperini 2000:23; Carnoy et al. 2007:67); the highest teacher to student ratio in the world (Figueroa 1997:122) and university participation of 69.1% of 18–24 year olds in 2005–6 (Barragán Duarte 2015) – are well-known and recognised even by many of Cuba’s ideological opponents, such as former World Bank president, James Wolfensohn (Wylie 2010:32). It is equally clear that education is used to promote revolutionary ideology and develop civic and personal values compatible with that ideology, a purpose unapologetically acknowledged by the Ministry of Education.

So we know (broadly) what the Revolution has meant for education. Less often considered in the polarised debate between those who see the Cuban education system as a paragon of egalitarian excellence and those who regard it as a sinister force for indoctrination, is what education has meant for the Revolution.

Simplistically, maintaining generous support for education is a political necessity. The ‘social gains’ achieved by the Revolution are a powerful source of legitimacy for the system, compensating for material shortages and limitations on liberties. Despite dissenting voices contending that ‘basic freedoms outweigh benefits like free university education’ (Font 2008:46), almost 60% of young people say education is the principal benefit they derive from the state (Domínguez García and Castilla García 2011:156). This trade-off reflects a conception of human rights and the state’s role directly opposed to that of its ideological antagonist, the United States; it holds that ‘second generation’ rights (education, health, employment, housing) are the basis of a just society, without

which ‘first generation’ rights (freedom of speech, voting rights, religious freedom) are meaningless.

Education’s relationship to the Revolution is, however, far more nuanced than simple pragmatism. Rather than something the Revolution has done for the people, the interaction between education and revolution is one of symbiotic development, in which the Cuban people are vital actors. As the Revolution has (re)formed education, educational outlooks and practices have formed the Revolution .

Debates over education have long defined the way in which Cuba thinks of itself as a nation. Education under Spanish rule was notable by its absence. In 1894 ‘90% of the population still received no formal education’ (Gillette 1972:4). Children of the white wealthy classes were generally educated in Spain then, as resistance to colonial rule grew, in the more ‘progressive’ United States (Pérez Jr 1999:35)). Schools were run by the Catholic Church, and were, therefore, pro-Spanish and politically conservative (Ginsberg et al. 2010:139).

Though limited in availability, education was socially and politically significant. José Martí, the writer, orator and *independentista* leader whose bust appears outside every school in Cuba is known in as ‘el maestro’ (the teacher) because he viewed culture and education as essential components in the battle for liberty. His followers in the Cuban Revolutionary Party and rebel army were far more likely than those fighting for the Spanish to be poor or black, and, therefore, far less likely to have received any education. This difference was exploited after the war when, attempting to bring about the election of a constitutional committee and government favourable to US interests, suffrage was limited to *literate* males with over \$250 in property – 5% of the adult Cuban population (Arnedo-Gómez 2006:21).

During the US occupation (1898–1902) following its intervention in Cuba’s independence war educational access increased dramatically. The paltry 312 schoolrooms in use in 1899 rose to 3,800 by 1902 (Fitzgibbon, 1964:46); for the first time, ordinary Cubans had the possibility of becoming educated. This significant investment by the United States was not, however, purely altruistic; it was vital to attempts to Americanise Cuban society – to bring about a hegemony of US values aimed at ensuring that, after

military withdrawal, Cubans would seek annexation or, at least, accept continuing economic penetration and political 'advice' (Schoultz 2009:23). New schools were modelled on those in the United States, from buildings to curricula (textbooks often direct translations of US equivalents) (Johnston 1995:2); thousands received teacher training in the United States; and the civics programme was lifted from New York's programme to assimilate new migrants into 'American' values and institutions (Pérez Jr 1999:160).

Cubans rejected annexation, but the newly independent nation was stymied by economic dependency on the United States and the restricted sovereignty offered by the Platt Amendment, which retained the United States' right to intervene militarily, at will, 'for the preservation of Cuban independence... life, property, and individual liberty' (Brenner et al. 1989:30). The period between 1902 and 1959, often referred to in Cuba as the 'neo-colony' because of the continuing extent of US influence, was one of dispute and disorientation regarding the political and civic content of education. There were significant debates between educators (largely in public schools) seeking to inculcate sentiments of patriotism and independence and others (largely in private schools) embracing civic and cultural practices implemented by a United States they viewed as civilised and progressive (Johnston 1995:3-4).

Such ideological questions, however, became academic for many, as Cuban education fell into decline and disarray. Despite Cuba's comparatively high level of economic development (Salazar Carrillo 1995:215), proportionately fewer children were in education in 1953 than in 1923 (Jolly 1964:168). Education spending, although insufficient, could have offered far higher levels of quality and inclusion than those that were present (Jolly 1964:173). The Ministry of Education, however, was notoriously corrupt; graft was endemic and teachers received a wage for life, regardless of whether they actually taught (Jolly 1964:172) and many classrooms remained empty, especially in rural areas (Lutjens 1996:74).

Fidel Castro's 'History Will Absolve Me' speech, delivered at his 1953 trial, following the abortive attempt to oust dictator Fulgencio Batista by storming the military barracks at Moncada, set out six fundamental problems in Cuban society that his 26th July

Movement believed they could resolve, Among them the parlous state of education, which he described as:

Little rural school houses attended by a mere half of the school age children – barefooted, half naked and under-nourished – and frequently the teacher must buy necessary school materials from his own salary. (Castro Ruz 1953:34).

The urban–rural divide in education reflected economic and social conditions in all aspects of Cuban life. Havana enjoyed a standard of living comparable to far richer nations (Huberman and Sweezy 1989:7); rural Cuba trailed in sanitation, housing and healthcare, a disparity that cemented racial inequality, as the (predominantly black) countryside played Cinderella to the (predominantly white) cities (Heuman 2014:163; Matijevic 2008). Lack of contact between different areas led to the marginalisation of the concerns of the rural poor.

Education was a case in point; middle-class young men and women attended university in high numbers, studying subjects often of little social value for most Cubans. Just 404 students at the University of Havana were studying agriculture or sugar production in 1953–54 (Lutjens 1996:74). Medicine concentrated on disciplines such as ‘cosmetic and plastic surgery [and] weight reduction procedures’ (MacDonald 2009:36). Many graduates were unwilling to work in rural areas, and healthcare for the rural poor was almost non-existent. In a country subject to tropical diseases, no courses were offered in immunology or infectious diseases (MacDonald 2009:35).

Fidel Castro’s government’s new attitude towards the countryside was anticipated by the rebels’ practices throughout the insurgency. The *guerrilla* fighters of the 1956–59 rebellion were unlikely champions of the *campesino* (countryperson); they were predominantly white, middle class and university educated – doctors and lawyers – part of the privileged elite. Their political beliefs were heterogeneous and undeveloped and the anticipated revolution was basically nationalist (Abendroth 2009:12), seeking independence and an end to the corruption and gangsterism afflicting Cuban politics. What educated and radicalised these young men and women was their experience of educating and radicalising others, and that was a singularly rural process.

The few who survived the government attack that immediately followed the rebels' landing in Cuba found themselves in an unfamiliar and hostile environment. They frequently relied on rural Cubans for food, shelter and the new recruits they gradually garnered during the Sierra Maestra campaign. Most importantly, they relied on them not to report their whereabouts to government forces. This dependency necessitated gaining local people's trust, accomplished partly by working together with *campesinos* in the fields, providing basic education and healthcare, and even instigating rudimentary systems of justice in remote areas.² As well as ensuring their survival, this strategy formed their political outlooks. It also had a prefigurative function, offering the rebels experience of administration and convincing a rural population, sceptical after decades of governments that promised much and delivered little, that these inexperienced youths, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, had what it takes to lead a nation.

On taking power in 1959, the rebels used mass mobilisation to fulfil three distinct functions. Firstly, newly formed Mass Organisations undertook essential roles such as civil defence, political education and agricultural work that would otherwise have proved problematic for the new government, struggling to rebuild broken institutions, especially given the exodus of much of the professional and administrative classes; secondly, it encouraged ordinary Cubans to feel ownership of the Revolution; and, finally, it enabled the implementation of some of the most ambitious social programmes ever attempted, most famously the Literacy Campaign.

At the UN in 1960, Fidel Castro made a dramatic commitment – to wipe out illiteracy (standing at that point at 23% of the population (Veltmeyer and Rushton 2011:157)) in just one year, declaring 1961 the 'Year of Education'. Perhaps even more remarkable than the campaign's success (Cuba reached the UNESCO standard for 'full literacy' within that twelve-month period (MacDonald 2009:58)) was how that success was achieved. Huge numbers were mobilised, urban literates taught neighbours and schools temporarily closed to allow teachers and their pupils to volunteer. Almost half the 271,000 volunteers (Fagen 1969:47) were city children who went into the countryside and lived with local families they were teaching, utilising teaching methods that encouraged conversation and engagement in the worldview of the student (Blum 2011:49). The

² For an in-depth exploration see Judson (1984).

campaign educated the young volunteers, previously shielded from rural poverty and inequality, along with their pupils. One former literacy worker's explained that:

Those months, for me, were like stories I have heard about conversions to a new religion... I did not need to read of this in Marx, in Lenin, in Martí. I did not need to read of what I saw before my own eyes (MacDonald 2009:54).

Rejecting the financial logic of concentrating first on those most likely to be economically active, the campaign focused equally on all sectors of society, offering tuition regardless of age, class, gender or race, with the oldest recorded new literate a former slave of 106 (MacDonald 2009:47). Given the unapologetically ideological content of the teaching materials used and the relatively low bar set for literacy (the ability to complete simple exercises in a primer and write a letter of thanks to Fidel Castro), one could characterise this egalitarianism as more about ensuring the broadest possible reach for the Revolution's message than any purely educational aim. This contention, however, is belied by the processes of *seguimiento* (follow-up) pursued throughout the 1960s.

Schooling was made universal for school-age children and the government embarked upon a 'battle' first for the sixth and then the ninth grade, using worker-student pathways to offer free part-time education to any adult wishing to continue studying (many of them new literates). Participation in education during the mid-1960s reached 2,186,500 (Lutjens 1996:76), meaning that in 1967 28% of the population were receiving regular instruction, at least half of them at primary level (MacDonald 2009:86).

Even today, inclusiveness in education is pursued not merely beyond the economic requirements of the labour market, but with totalising fervour. Cuba was early in implementing education for children with physical or learning disabilities, beginning such schooling in 1959 (MacDonald 2009:210);³ it sends teachers to the homes of students whose illness or disability prevents them from leaving the house and runs rural schools even where only one or two children are enrolled.⁴ These decisions, along with changes to social policy, and the introduction of free nursery schooling (run for many years by

³ This continues to be delivered through discrete provision, with mainstream options regarded as an 'integrationist façade' (Gasperini 2000:16).

⁴ See Alejandro Ramírez Anderson's 2013 documentary short *Una Escuela, Una Niña*.

Cuba's women's organisation, the FMC) led to far greater inclusion in higher education and massively improved employment prospects for black Cubans and women.

The motivation behind universal education is, however, not simply dedication to the abstract principle of promoting learning and culture; it is a commitment to forming citizens whose values, paradigms, even personalities, accord with the beliefs and practices of revolutionary *cubanía*, which, combining socialist principles with extant notions of Cubanness, can be seen as the Cuban ideology (Kapcia 2000). Ché Guevara called this citizen the New Cuban Man.

To understand the importance of this construct one must appreciate that, in orthodox Marxist terms, Cuba in 1959 did not fulfil the objective conditions (developed industrial capitalism) for revolution and transition to socialism. Guevara's argument was that socialism could indeed take hold, given the appropriate *subjective* conditions – essentially the will and consciousness of its citizens. To this end he advocated transforming Cuban society into 'one huge school' (Guevara 1964:391) where education, in its broadest sense, would expand Cubans' political, cultural, personal and moral constitutions, creating a people capable of making and sustaining the Revolution.

While the short-lived selective Schools of Revolutionary Instruction (EIR) developed political cadres using a curriculum based on Soviet texts and ideology, ordinary schools propagated in young people values and attitudes associated with a socialism that was thoroughly Cuban. Political education in Marxism-Leninism was (and still is) present in schools but was less emphasised than knowledge of and reverence for a Cuban history framed always and only as a linear narrative of struggle for sovereignty and against oppression (Smith 2015:108).

In keeping with the importance of mobilisation and participation in Cuba, schools develop both civic habits (through elected student representatives, monitors and the Pioneers youth organisation) and collective behaviours. Collectivism is encouraged through 'communist emulation', whereby rewards are given only when all members of a class or group reach a particular target, meaning that in order to succeed confident students have to help and support those struggling (Blum 2011:153). Cuban schools are integrated into their communities: parents' organisations are strong and teachers regularly

visit pupils at home; cultural expression is vital to school life, with frequent and high quality musical, dance and theatrical performances (a commitment strengthened in recent years by the introduction of art instructors in thousands of schools, encouraging art appreciation and access to culture (Velázquez López 2005:12)); local workplaces act as ‘godparents’ to nearby schools; and every school day begins with reading and discussion of current news stories (Lutjens 1996:130).

An essential element both of the New Cuban (Wo)Man and of Cuba’s attempt to attain the subjective conditions for revolution was the idea that ‘material incentives’ to work could be rendered less significant than the ‘moral incentives’ of recognition, love of work and the good of society. While workers were encouraged to study and volunteer in their own time, school children became student–workers, required to complete agricultural labour as part of their schooling.

Well-equipped boarding schools, known as *escuelas en el campo* (schools in the countryside), where students spent half their day completing agricultural work and the other in class, were set up in rural areas in an attempt to foster love of work and values of cooperation associated with collective living (Fernández 2000:91). Although testimony suggests that even recent students found the experience beneficial in forming values and building independent adult identities (Smith 2015:174), these schools became increasingly unpopular throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as the Special Period led to declining living conditions. Raúl Castro announced in 2009 that all such boarding schools were to be closed (Blum 2014:427).

Still in existence, and a characteristic element of Cuban schooling since 1966, are the *escuelas al campo* (schools to the countryside) – stints of several weeks agricultural work in the countryside (Blum 2011:56). These too are criticised by parents concerned about conditions and struggling to provide the extra food that children take to supplement unappetising rations. Reports of their efficacy are mixed. Damian J Fernández states that young people regard them as ‘a disorder, a joke, where the young do the least amount of work and the most amount of partying possible’ (Fernández 2000:91), whereas Blum, who went with students on a contemporary *escuela al campo* described that, despite the reluctance of many young people to going on the trip, the difficult circumstances were markedly effective in encouraging collective behaviours and solidarity (Blum 2011:202).

The political emphasis in Cuban schools is replicated in universities, where there is almost universal membership of the FEU (Federation of University Students), which organises political and social events, represents students' interests and influences the placement of students in work once their degrees are complete. 79% of students in traditional universities are members of the Young Communists (Domínguez García, undated:17), generally signalling a later transition to membership of the PCC (Cuban Communist Party). University curricula also place Cuban history and political education in the same prominent position seen in schools. Entrance exams require all applicants to pass history (*Juventud Rebelde* 2015), and the first year of all degrees includes a course on Cuban history.

Access to university saw a '77-fold [increase] between 1958 and 1990' (Eckstein 1997:109), and around 3% of the Cuban population enrolled in higher education in 1987–88 (Lutjens 1996:101). This increase, however, was based on the social value of higher education at least as much as on the intrinsic rights of individuals to study. Jettisoning the pre-revolutionary emphasis on student choice, the post-1959 government allocated places based on the country's need for graduates in various professions, by 1980, over 40% of university students were studying pedagogy, 17% technical sciences and just 5.5% humanities (Lutjens 1996:102).

Today, places in socially useful but unpopular subjects, such as agriculture and education, are filled using a points-based system: potential students identify ten subjects and rank them by preference. Each subject (depending on popularity and number of places available) requires a different score, with very popular subjects, notably foreign languages, which opens the door to jobs in tourism, requiring results in the high 90s. It has been argued that central control over not just university places but also what research is carried restricts the academic and political freedoms of Cuban universities, which had retained notable independence from government even under the corrupt and sometimes dictatorial regimes of the 'neocolonial' period (Wickham Crowley 1992:191). One result of this control, however, is that research is the property of the nation and can be freely used for programmes of social value. The recent notable success of Cuban scientists in the field of biomedical research is at least partly attributable to Cuba's alternative approach to intellectual property (Reid-Henry 2010:120). A similar decision, and one

indicative of the value placed by the Revolution on the cultural and educational development of all of its citizens, was seen in the early years, when copyright was ignored and cheap copies of international works of literature were reproduced and made available to ordinary Cubans (MacDonald 2009:131).

At no time since 1959 has education been limited to formal, institutional instruction. Mass Organisations immediately took on a broad educational role in communities, musicians and artists are paid by the state, culture houses were set up in every community, and cultural events, such as cinema, theatrical and musical performances and sporting events, were made free or affordable. Cubans access varied culture in high numbers, with mainstream Cuban cinemas showing everything from Hollywood blockbusters to minor international art films and documentaries. The less quantifiable, but still more noticeable, result is a palpable sense of cultural and intellectual confidence among Cubans, including where levels of formal education are not high. Researching in Cuba continually highlights how even young people, who are frequently characterised by their elders as less culturally and socially engaged, are able to discuss with self-assurance a broad range of political, social and cultural issues (Smith 2015:347).

Fears over the cultural impact of the Special Period first raised at a conference of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) in 1998 led to a renewed emphasis on informal education and cultural development (Frederick 2009:100). Recent projects have included the University for All programme (offering free access to education through television programmes and supportive material), huge and well-attended book fairs that tour the country and the placing of an art instructor in every school and culture house. The power and potential of these non-formal educational organisations is demonstrated by the success of the National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX), an outgrowth of the Cuban women's movement that researches, educates and campaigns to facilitate social change, most notably revolutionising Cuban society's attitudes and policy in relation to LGBT communities (Kirk, 2011).

Education policy in Cuba in the 1960s matched the mood and priorities of the time, which stressed mass participation and increasing educational access ahead of consistent high quality and organisation. While retaining its high-priority status, education in Cuba has undergone a number of policy shifts and reversals in the years that have followed,

reflecting wider developments in political emphasis. As the initial revolutionary fervour subsided and new systems became embedded, the political reality of Cuba's economic reliance on the Soviet Union led to institutionalisation and a reduction in political iconoclasm. The *zafra* (sugar harvest) of 1970, when the population was mobilised in an attempt to achieve a record ten million tonne harvest, was widely regarded as an expensive, ill-advised experiment (Guerra 2012:309) and the 'last hurrah' of the intense participation of the early years.

In education, institutionalisation was encompassed in a policy of *perfeccionamiento* (improvement), and the basic structures introduced at this time still operate. There is a separate ministry for higher education, but in all other areas, including adult education and special education, structures, curricula and texts are set nationally by the Ministry of Education, with its *Consejo de Dirección* setting policy and strategic direction. The organisation of provision based on central direction is then provided by provincial and municipal bodies scrutinised by local democratic structures. Another important force is parent-led bodies such as school councils and the FMC's 'Militant Mothers', which provide practical and directional support to schools. Membership of this organisation peaked at 1.7 million and its role within schools has included everything from cleaning the dormitories of boarding school students and helping monitor attendance to bringing about the dismissal of head teachers they consider not be performing as required (Lutjens 1996:145).

Perfeccionamiento built on almost universal access, developing curricula and focusing on teacher training until, by the end of the 1980s, 94% of teachers held degrees in education (Gasperini 2000:67). It also reflected a wider move towards pragmatism, recognising that the weight previously placed upon academic, particularly university, education had exceeded economic reality and was failing to produce sufficient workers with vocational training for agriculture and industry. This produced a policy of 'deschooling', which reversed the previous 60:40 split in high school places between pre-university and technical schools and dramatically reduced the number of university places (Eckstein 1997:115). While the economic arguments for this policy were significant, it was profoundly unpopular in Cuba, where high-level academic education was seen as a right and entrance into 'professional' fields highly prized. This conflict between the inalienable

right to education and economic and vocational opportunities continues to be a substantial and largely unresolved problem for policymakers in Cuba.

From the mid-1980s there was a reaction against the institutionalisation and perceived subservience to the USSR of the 1970s and early 1980s, which was seen as leading to complacency among young Cubans brought up in a relatively stable and comfortable political and economic climate. This reaction was formalised into a new policy direction by Fidel Castro in 1986: recognising the 'past errors and negative tendencies' of this previous period, he announced the beginning of a phase of 'rectification', a return to the prioritisation of moral incentives and mass participation. A central change to education policy was the decision to introduce discrete provision of civic education, and curricula and texts were planned that had at their core the promotion of 'Cuban' values of solidarity, internationalism and struggle. The new texts underlined the importance of revolutionary figures, such as José Martí and Ché Guevara, portrayed work, strict moral continence and social participation as inherently patriotic and revolutionary, and told the 'story' of the Revolution as a linear progression with unambiguously positive outcomes (Smith 2015:127).

By the time these texts were in place, however, Cuba had changed dramatically and irrevocably. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the onset of the Special Period disoriented and traumatised a population accustomed to having their basic needs provided by the state through collective endeavour. Far from reaching the zenith of perfectly functioning socialism, young people now had to reconcile themselves to a standard of living far lower than that enjoyed by their parents' generation. Inside school, they saw increased class sizes and scarce resources. Outside school, they saw malnutrition, material deterioration of housing and infrastructure, and rapid increases in inequality.

This rise in economic inequality has been the most pernicious long-term effect of the Special Period. Cuban wages, although determined by profession (Yaffe 2008), have never been steeply differentiated during the revolutionary period, which, combined with state provision of free education and healthcare, subsidised housing and a ration card for basic foodstuffs, had meant inequality was minimal. The distorting dollar black market, however, which arose during the 1990s, necessitated the legalisation of the dollar

(afterwards replaced by the convertible peso) (Sobe and Timberlake 2012:359). At a conversion rate of 24 Cuban pesos to one CUC, the real value of workers' salaries plummeted – a problem that has not been resolved today, with Raúl Castro admitting in 2007 that state wages are insufficient for survival (Sullivan 2011:13). Possession of dollars became the key to a good standard of living, and those without access to the dollar economy through remittances from relatives abroad could only obtain dollars through work in tourism, where, although wages were still paid in Cuban pesos, bonuses and tips could be received in CUC. New inequalities, disturbingly, appear to be falling most severely on groups, such as black Cubans living in marginalised *barrios*, that were most disadvantaged prior to the Revolution.⁵ A further effect is that many highly educated Cubans are relinquishing careers in valuable but poorly remunerated areas, such as medicine, to work in the service sector.

This crisis was particularly severe for teachers, where long hours and onerous responsibilities precluded the second jobs and other moneymaking stratagems that many Cubans used to supplement their incomes, prompting an exodus from the profession. In a bold move, reminiscent of the Literacy Campaign, the government instigated a scheme of accelerated training of sixteen and seventeen year olds as teachers in both primary and secondary education. The thousands of *maestros emergentes* (emergent or emergency teachers), signed up for a gruelling eight-year stint, in which they fulfilled a full teaching timetable while completing their high school education and university degrees in the evening and at weekends.

The prevalence of such teachers, who quickly became the majority in many schools (particularly in Havana), led to profound changes in the character of the profession and of Cuban schools, not merely because they were less experienced and qualified but also because of their demographic – more youthful, less exclusively female, less likely to see education as a long-term career. Along with reductions in class sizes, extensive use of video classes to supplement teacher knowledge, the change to one teacher for all subjects in basic secondary (with the exception of PE and foreign languages) and the end to the increasingly unpopular *escuelas en el campo*, this transformation makes it possible to speak of a new system of schooling in Cuba in 2010 as compared to 1980. Many aspects, such as the prominence of video classes and the reliance on *maestros emergentes* have received

⁵ Black Cubans are nearly half as likely receive remittances than white Cubans (Díaz-Briquets 2008:156).

significant criticism, with many Cubans speaking of falling educational standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy (although this must be recognised as a fall from a very high base level). In the comparatively secure economic climate of the 2010s, *emergente* training is no longer used and investment in education remains high. Changes to curricula and outdated textbooks are also currently in progress. Difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, however, remain a pressing problem.

The *maestros emergentes* programme, along with schemes to train young people as social workers, nurses and art instructors, precipitated a new form of higher education, known both as municipalisation and universalisation. The principal incentive used to attract young people into the schemes was the promise of a university place without taking the normal stringent entrance exams. As the projects ballooned, however, and it became evident that the many thousands of new students could not be accommodated within the existing university system, a structure of Sedes Universitarias Municipales (SUM) was set up.

Satellite sites of existing universities, 774 SUM were formed by 2004, at least one in each of Cuba's 168 municipalities (*Universalización de la Universidad*, 2004:16). Housed in schools and other public buildings in the evening and at weekends, the SUM offered part-time degrees in a limited number of (mostly social science) subjects, espousing an alternative pedagogy stressing independent study skills and pastoral support. The flexible approach allowed students to take study breaks and complete their degrees in a variable number of years. Gradually extending their intake from *emergentes* to incorporate workers, parents and others unable to access traditional universities, the scheme raised numbers in higher education to unprecedented levels, with 360,000 studying in the municipalised system in 2005-2006, many of them from disadvantaged backgrounds (Colectivo de Autores 2006:2). This was an important benefit given that, since the 'deschooling' process of the 1980s and 1990s, students in traditional universities were increasingly likely to be white and the children of professionals. Circumventing entrance exams, however, provoked accusations that the calibre of students in the municipalised universities was lower than in traditional universities and that their degrees were not of equal standing.

These debates replicated wider conversations in the nation. *Emergente* and universalisation programmes were integral to the Battle of Ideas, an raft of social policy initiatives to redress the social consequences of the Special Period and (re)assimilate disengaged youth that represented a momentous shift in Cuban social policy: a move away from universal, egalitarian support and ‘meritocratic’ access to education to targeted intervention to benefit the most disadvantaged (Gómez Cabezas 2012:37). Such moves, particularly their emphasis on young people neither working nor studying, encountered criticism for using valuable collective resources to advantage those perceived as not having contributed to society in the ways traditionally valued in the Cuban social consciousness.

Opening access to marginalised groups was particularly significant because the prevalence of social science subjects meant thousands of students emerging conscientised – equipped to analyse the problems affecting them and their communities and, potentially, to act through Mass Organisations and local democracy to challenge and change their own reality. In vocational terms, however, universalisation’s concentration on social science subjects exacerbated Cuba’s already acute problem of over-supply in certain sectors.

Young Cubans’ frequent complaint that they cannot to exercise their chosen profession, due to over-supply or because state wages are inadequate represents a challenging, perhaps insuperable, contradiction in education policy, causing many highly educated and relatively politically conformist young Cubans to consider emigration. Treating education as a necessary condition for full human existence and full societal participation is laudable – a cornerstone of the Revolution and the values of human dignity for which it stands. And young people believe that too. Despite concerns over their professional futures, they consistently restate that education transcends economics – an intrinsic good. Fidel Castro’s aspiration that a tractor driver could gain a degree without wishing to cease driving a tractor (Jiménez Padilla et al. 2014) is, nevertheless, unrealistic and denies young people the chance to become the citizens and protagonists their education has formed them to be.

Squaring this circle is a task for today’s young Cubans. The capacity of the Cuban Revolution to develop and adapt in the face of internal and global change, while maintaining core ideological tenets, is proven. As a result of universal access to an

education system whose quality, in terms of academic and cultural excellence and concentration on political and social values, continues to be outstanding, young Cubans' understanding of the problems they and their country face is sophisticated and articulate. The professional and economic expectations raised by education in Cuba continue to constitute an unresolved and potentially explosive problem for the Revolution. It may be, however that its very survival of the Special Period and its aftermath of increased marketisation and social division is due in great part to its continued commitment to an education system that continues to create highly qualified, culturally developed and politically conscious New Women and New Men – citizens capable of (re)making the Revolution for a new century.

Bibliography

----- 'Funcionarios del MES dialogaron on-line sobre el ingreso a la Universidad' in *Juventud Rebelde* 14.02.2015.

Abendroth, Mark. *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship*. Dulworth: Letwin, 2009.

Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2004. <http://www.oei.es/quipu/cuba/cub04.pdf> accessed 11.05.2010.

Arnedo-Gómez, Miguel. *Writing Rumba: The Afrocubanista Movement in Poetry*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006.

Barragán Duarte, José Luis. 'Primer mapa latino de la educación superior'. <http://historico.unperiodico.unal.edu.co/ediciones/113/08.html> accessed 18.05.2015.

Bas, Japji Anna. 'Reorientation in Agriculture' in *Cuba: In Transition?* CUNY, 2006. http://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/Bildner%20Center%20for%20Western%20Hemisphere%20Studies/Publications/Bas3.pdf accessed 18.05.2015.

Cole, Ken. 'Cuba: The Process of Socialist Development' in *Latin American Perspectives*. Vol.29, No.3, May 2002, pp40-56.

Blum, Denise F. *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Blum, Denise. 'Cuban educational reform during the "Special Period": dust, ashes and diamonds' in Brenner, Phillip et al., eds. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014, pp423-431.

Brenner et al., eds. 'The Platt Amendment' in *The Cuba Reader: The Making of a Revolutionary Society*. New York: Grove, 1989, pp30-31.

Brenner, Phillip et al., eds. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

Carnoy, Martin et al. *Cuba's Academic Advantage: Why Students in Cuba Do Better in School*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Castro Ruz, Fidel. 'History Will Absolve Me' in Brenner et al., eds. *The Cuba Reader*. New York: Grove, 1989. pp31-35.

Colectivo de Autores. *La Nueva Universidad Cubana y su contribución a la universalización del conocimiento*. La Habana: Félix Varela, 2006.

Díaz-Briquets, Sergio. 'Remittances to Cuba: An Update', ASCE (Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy) conference Cuba in Transition, 2008.

Domínguez, María Isabel. 'Justicia social y juventud: retos y perspectivas para la sociedad cubana en el nuevo siglo'. Havana: CIPS, undated report.

Domínguez García, María Isabel and Castilla García, Claudia. 'Prácticas participativas en grupos juveniles de Ciudad de la Habana'. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, 2011, 1(9), pp141-160.

Eckstein, Susan. 'The Coming Crisis in Cuban Education' in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, Vol.4, No.1, 1997, pp107-120.

Fagen, Richard. *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1969.

- Fernández, Damián J. *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Figueroa, Oneida Álvarez. 'El sistema educativo en los noventa' in *Papers* 52. Centro de Investigaciones de Economía Internacional, 1997, pp115-137.
- Fitzgibbon, Russell H. *Cuba and the United States*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1964.
- Font, Mauricio A. 'Cuba and Castro: Beyond the Battle of Ideas' in Font *Changing Cuba/ Changing World*. New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 2008, pp43-72.
- Frederick, Laurie. 'Pre-emptive nostalgia and *La Batalla* for Cuban Identity: Option Zero Theatre' in Hernández Reguant, Ariana *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Gasparini, Lavinia. 'The Cuban Education System: Lessons and Dilemmas' in *Country Studies: Education Reform and Management Publication Series*. Vol.1, No.5, July 2000.
- Gillette, Arthur. *Cuba's Educational Revolution*. London: Fabian Society, 1972.
- Ginsberg, Mark et al. 'Constructing Worker-Citizens In/Through Teacher Education in Cuba: Curricular Goals in the Changing Political Economic Context' in *Globalisation, Comparative Education and Policy Research*. Vol.9, pt.2, 2010, pp137-163.
- Gómez Cabezas, Enrique Javier. 'El trabajo social en el pensamiento de Fidel Castro Ruz' in Caballero Labaut, Ana María, ed. *Trabajo Social en Cuba. Retos en el siglo XXI*. Havana: Editorial Unión, 2012, pp31-47.
- Guerra, Lillian. *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Guevara, Ernesto Che. 'Man and Socialism in Cuba' in Gerassi *Venceremos!: the speeches and writings of Ernesto Che Guevara*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968, pp387-400.
- Heuman, Gad. *The Caribbean: A Brief History*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Jiménez Padilla, Tamara et al. 'El proceso de universalización para la especialidad de cultura física; un sueño hecho realidad' in *EFDportes.com, Revista Digital*. Buenos Aires - Año 19 - N° 194 - Julio de 2014.
- Johnston, Laurie. 'Education and Cuba Libre, 1898-1958' in *History Today* Vol.45, no.8, 1995.
- Jolly, Richard. 'Education' in Seers *Cuba: the economic and social revolution*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1964, pp161-282.
- Judson, Fred. *Cuba and the revolutionary myth: the political education of the Cuban Rebel Army*. Boulder, London: Westview, 1984.
- Kapcia, Antoni. *Cuba: Island of Dreams*. Oxford: Berg, 2000.
- Kirk, Emily J. 'Setting the Agenda for Cuban Sexuality: The Role of Cuba's CENESEX'. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. Vol. 36 No. 72, 2011, pp. 143-163.
- Lutjens, Sheryl L. *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. Westview: Boulder, Colorado, 1996.
- MacDonald, Théodore H. *The education revolution: Cuba's alternative to neoliberalism*. Croydon: Manifesto, 2009.
- Matijevic, Danijel. 'Love, embittered: review of Louis A Pérez Jr.'s on becoming Cuban: identity, nationality, and culture', 2008. <http://www.lepanoptique.com/sections/histoire/love-embittered-review-of-louis-a-perez-jrs-on-becoming-cuban-identity-nationality-and-culture/> accessed 19.05.2015.
- MEDICC (Medical Educational Cooperation with Cuba) website. http://medicc.org/ns/?page_id=63 accessed 18.05.2015.

Pérez Jr., Louis A. *On Becoming Cuban: Nationality, Identity and Culture*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Reid-Henry, S.M. *The Cuban Cure: Reason and Resistance in Global Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Salazar Carrillo, Jorge. 'Interdependence and Economic Performance in Cuba' in Horowitz, Irving Louis, ed. *Cuban Communism/8th Edition*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995.

Schoultz, Lars. *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Smith, Rosemary. *The Lost Generation?: Education and the Search for the new Cuban Citizen Identity*. Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2015.

Sobe, Noah B. and Timberlake, Renee N. 'Staying the (Post) Socialist Course: Global/Local transformations in Cuban Education' in Silova, Iveta, ed. *Post-Socialism Is Not Dead: (Re)Reading The Global In Comparative Education*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010, pp351-368.

Sullivan, Mark P. 'Cuba's Political Succession: From Fidel to Raúl Castro', *CRS Report to Congress*, 2007.

Velázquez López, María Victoria. 'Formación de instructores de arte. La experiencia cubana'. Course 21, *Pedagogía* conference, La Habana, 2005.

Wickham Crowley, Timothy P. *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Wilkinson, Steven. 'Cuba can cope without Chavez' in *The Guardian*, 05.07.2011.

worldbymap.org. <http://world.bymap.org/LiteracyRates.html> accessed 11.05.2010.

World Health Organisation. 'Neurological Disorders: A Public Health Approach' in *Neurological Disorders: Public Health Challenges*, 2006.
http://who.int/mental_health/neurology/chapter_3_b_neuro_disorders_public_h_challenges.pdf
accessed 10.10.2014.

Wylie, Lana. *Perceptions of Cuba: Canadian and American Policies in Comparative Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

Yaffe, Helen. 'Cuba's wage changes have nothing to do with a return to capitalism' in *The Guardian*, 20.06.2008.