

Education in Cuba between 1959 and 2010

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FOR THE analysis of the historical development of (general and higher) education between 1959 and 2010, this article has been divided into different *periods* that reflect the essence of the problems each stage went through. Education is a social phenomenon that reflects the prevailing historical conditions and that should correspond to the circumstances.

A better understanding of the object of analysis requires clarifying that, in Cuba, education is a well-structured system and comprises the following subsystems: preschool, general (primary, basic secondary and higher education); adult, special, technical and professional education; training of pedagogical and higher education staff; the latter includes the pedagogical universities. Two Ministries of Education were established in 1976, one for Higher Education and the other for the rest of the subsystems.

A method of political and social character was introduced in the *period 1959-1961*. Due to its great efficacy, this method is still in force, with essentially educational purposes: *the speeches of the leaders of the Revolution, particularly Fidel Castro*. These speeches lead the Cuban people to reflect on international and especially national problems. The educational policy and the parameters that served as the foundation for Cuban pedagogy were also outlined in said speeches. The main recurring idea is that *education is the only means to be saved from slavery*, an expression of Martí's thought. The limitations inherited by the Revolution in the field of education are analyzed repeatedly, since there were large disadvantaged social groups, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The limitations of education comprised especially the following areas: children (preschool); special, technical and vocational education, which were at a low level of development; as well as general education, which failed to reach all social strata. And, of course, the illiteracy rate was such that in a population of 5.5 million, this scourge affected on average 23.6% of those over 15 years of age; in mountain and rural areas it reached 40%. There were only 15,000 university students, three universities, one of which was private (Villanueva), and many trained teachers who had no schools to practice.

The recurrent idea in these interventions is the need for all the people to achieve human fulfillment. The laws enacted at that time were intended to create the necessary superstructure in the history of Cuba and possibly of Latin America. The approach to education is essentially that of Martí's. This can be

seen in the speeches of Fidel and Raúl Castro, and is contained in the *Educational Message to the People of Cuba* (1959). We also find in the period an excellent intervention by Ernesto Che Guevara on universities and their necessary transformation. The full reform of education is therefore implemented, representing a first attempt to structure a national, coherent and harmonious school system.

The period ends with the Declaration of Cuba as a Territory Free of Illiteracy on December 22, 1961. It was a great historical achievement not only from the political standpoint, but also because of the depth and scientific character of the process. Within such a short period, the *Moncada Program* was fulfilled.

The period 1962-1975 marks the transition to a socialist education, school and pedagogy, which can be divided into two sub-periods

The period *1962-1979* witnessed the continuity of the transformations in (general and higher) education and the consolidation of the changes in progress. The success of the Literacy Campaign set the conditions for the country to immediately start working to improve the educational level of rural and urban workers, especially through adult education, the battle for the 6th grade and the establishment of preparatory universities that opened the doors of higher education to workers.

Although the purpose of education was well defined from the humanist perspective, the same did not happen with the educational plans and programs, as these were still influenced by previous historical stages. Educational services were considerably expanded in the late 1960s, thus requiring changes in the structure and functioning of the national education system, as well as the development of new educational concepts to guide the practice. The speeches, which explain the actions, reflect these contradictions. The University Reform, a landmark in Cuban higher education, was implemented in 1962. The well-known speech of Ernesto Che Guevara on “Socialism and man in Cuba” was a great inspiration to guide the thought process.

The need for an urgent response to the demands of society determined the implementation of special education plans, such as those for the empowerment of women or for technological centers, endowed with an organization and dynamism that exceeded, at that time, the possibilities of the duties of the Ministry of Education.

The creation of the Department of Scholarships and the implementation of the massive scholarship students plan in 1962 materialized the effective right to education of all citizens, by ensuring them all services related to education and fulfillment of their basic needs, provided free of charge by the State.



Participants in the National Illiteracy Eradication Campaign, Cuba, 1960-1961.

The introduction of “physical education” and the training of athletes from the basic level of education, with its culmination in the Sports, School and Youth Games translated, in the short and medium term, into the achievement of prominent positions in the sphere of physical culture and sports, both nationally and internationally. The need to ensure students a close link to production and political and social tasks is expressed in the emphasis placed on the principle of combining study with productive work at all levels of education.

Another sub-period starts *between 1971 and 1975*, in which all necessary measures were taken to restructure and improve the national educational system. The interest in diagnosing the reality of education was strengthened. This particular aspect is seen at the First National Congress of Education and Culture of April 1971. In that event, Cuban teaching professionals were extremely ex-

cited and critical when pointing out the difficulties faced by education. In April 1972 Fidel Castro expressed the need for a profound revolution in education.

The University Reform produced changes in both the academic and social spheres. Among them was the establishment of a comprehensive system of free scholarships which, over the years, enabled thousands of children of workers and peasants to become the first university graduates in their families. The creation, organization and consolidation of regular courses for workers and the universal access process were some of the landmarks. In the aforementioned Reform, a Committee was created to understand the promotion and development of systematic scientific research in universities and their facilities. It can be said that during the 1960s and 1970s Cuba trained a significant number of new professionals, among them a considerable number of researchers. Since then Cuba has experienced a significant growth in its scientific potential.

The establishment of the Manuel Ascunce Domenech Pedagogical Department, the generalization of basic secondary schools (high school) in rural areas, the emphasis placed on the “school to the countryside” plan and other pedagogical experiences developed in the 1970s are true expressions of the revolutionary educational policy implemented to address some of the problems of previous decades.

The scientific Diagnosis and Prognosis of education started in the school year 1972-1973, with the assistance of Soviet and German experts and the participation of an outstanding group of Cuban educators. It should be said that this contact was very fruitful, as it provided the opportunity to become acquainted and study the works of the Germans and Soviets, which were of great importance for shaping the Cuban pedagogical thinking. In 1972 the Center for Educational Development was established to guide this process of change in general education, which covered all levels of education: preschool, technical and vocational, special, adult, as well as teacher training. Higher education followed this path with its own peculiarities.

Variants of the “school to the countryside” and the “school in the countryside” were introduced, consolidating the principle of the link between school and work and between theory and practice, these also undertaken by higher education. Anyway, in the last years of education the link between education, work and research is directly related to the professional profile of the student, as an integral part of the academic training.

The First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba was held in December 1975. On the same occasion the Educational Policy Thesis was presented, with its corresponding Resolution approving the socialist Marxist-Leninist pedagogy, without losing sight of Martí’s educational thought and of the historical heritage of the Cuban educational thought of all times. The purpose and objectives of education were clearly established. A substantial shift was introduced in the theoretical conception of education, which reinforced the humanistic as well

as Martí's approach. The First Improvement of the National Education System was introduced and approved as the result of a thorough scientific study.

The teacher training plans offered emerging solutions for the rapid and continuous expansion of educational services, but at the same time were subjected to the new experiences stemming from the technical and socio-economic development of the country.

A new period starts between 1976 and 1990, characterized by the deepening of the foundations of socialist Pedagogy and the principle of Continuous Improvement of the National Education System

The First Improvement of the National Education System was implemented between 1976 and 1985. The Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences (ICCP in the Spanish acronym) established in 1976, began to play an important role in conducting Educational Sciences (including Pedagogy and Didactics) throughout the country. The Institute conducted this Improvement up to its implementation in stages between 1975 and 1986. This meant a change in the structure of the Subsystems that make up the National Education System and in the contents of school curricula and programs, as well as in the preparation of textbooks, in addition to school supplies. The process involved the participation of dozens of experts from different disciplines and scholars who collaborated extensively. Teacher Training in the Higher Pedagogical Institutes was also adjusted. When a new plan was introduced, the ICCP was charged with conducting a survey to evaluate the beginning of the changes, which led to the necessary adjustments and corrections.

The internationalist political-ideological and patriotic education was strengthened during that sub-period. A new Constitution of the Republic was approved in 1976, defining the kind of man the country wanted to develop and the role to be played by education in society. The principles stemming from the Educational Policy Thesis were thus reaffirmed.

With regard to higher education, it should be mentioned that the achievements of Cuban scientists, in their majority graduates from higher education institutions, were possible during that and in the following periods especially because research was a state priority even in times of severe economic constraints. Scientific institutions worked collaboratively with each other and with research groups from universities to make the most of the scientific potential identified in higher education institutions throughout the country.

The Second Improvement of the National Education System, which was implemented in the *sub-period from 1986 to 1990*, contained the changes needed to modernize and introduce some flexibility in the school curricula and programs. The first International Pedagogy Congress held in 1986 was a very important laboratory for becoming acquainted with the situation of education in Latin America and in the world. Eleven congresses of great historical significance

to Cuban and Latin American education were held until 2009. The Association of Latin American and Caribbean Educators (AELAC in the Spanish acronym), of which Cuba is a member, was established in one of those congresses.

The new Improvement began to exert its positive influence and was gradually developed between 1987 and 1990 through important research conducted by the pedagogical universities. All was moving apace and with excellent results, until the emergence of international events with a remarkable impact on the country led to the introduction of emergency measures for national education.

It should be pointed out that despite these circumstances, the educational level of the Cuban population, on average, rose from 6th to 9th grade. In 30 years, education in the country had made significant progress.

The period 1991-2000 can be termed Struggle for the strengthening of ideological work in education

The period was marked by a difficult economic situation in the country. The demise of Eastern European socialism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union aggravated the attacks on the country, and the historical circumstances changed abruptly. It was the beginning of the so-called “Special Period in Peacetime”. Those were years of the struggle to strengthen ideological work in education. The country attempted to sustain the achievements in this sector. No educational institution was closed down and the education development process continued at all levels. The period is a clear example of the commitment and dedication of Cuban teaching professionals to their work which, in adverse circumstances managed to maintain the success of education and achieve satisfactory results.

The period between 2001 and 2005: revolutionary changes through the advance of a comprehensive general culture

The effort focused on putting education on a par with the present times. The rational use of technology applied to education, the “Battle of Ideas Program”, opened new horizons for reflection on and analysis of education and sciences. Ensuring universal access to higher education was another key factor in that period. Other forms of education were developed by the mass media such as television, with an essentially educational purpose. The “University for All” and “Roundtable” programs afforded the population at large all the possibilities to be up to date with the latest events in international and national politics, as well as to enrich their general knowledge in all areas of knowledge and better understand their place in the country and in the world.

In higher education, as part of the graduate education provided free of charge to all Cuban professionals, university professors rely on different types of courses such as undergraduate and master’s programs set up especially to help them improve their teaching performance. Moreover, there is a broad system of means for getting a PhD in Educational and Pedagogical Sciences in different modalities. This commitment benefits not only Cubans, since there is a plan

to offer these services to educators from other countries that request it, with obvious gains.

The period between 2005 and 2010: education in tune with its time

This period was marked by an effort to enrich the national education system and put it in tune with the requirements of current times.

There was a wider and more flexible openness to the pluralism of ideas, although this pluralism was not undifferentiated. There was a struggle for the unity of thought on educational issues, which did not mean utter servility of opinions. There was a clear awareness that education was the path available to man for him to be rooted in his culture without losing his individuality. As Fidel Castro said, “*we need to change everything that should be changed*” for education to pursue its development without hindrances of any kind, and with it the full education and development of man.

Education in Cuba rectifies its emerging path, which is was forced to take in order to become a social function founded on the most advanced science and technique, based on a concept of its own that has deep humanist roots dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Cuba’s motto is: the deep and dangerous problems of today’s world can only be solved through education and love.

Cuba has hundreds of educators and researchers with works of their own containing the most important principles of universal and regional thought, but undoubtedly with Cuba’s signature. The articles, essays and texts on education written and published in the country are many, as is the research in progress.

To assess the scope of education in 2010, the following data are useful:

There is no illiteracy.

The average schooling level of the Cuban population is close to ten grades (each grade represents one year of schooling); before 1959 it was only three grades.

Cuba has a population of 11.2 million and nearly 1 million university graduates in the past 50 years.

Families and communities, previously trained, were involved in the Educate your Child Program, so as to provide assistant to younger children, thus contributing to ensure the enrolment of almost all children in the country in educational institutions.

There is no poor academic performance. This is clear when we see that 99.4% of children attending primary school are between 6 and 11 years of age.

Ninety-five percent of students enrolled in the basic level complete their studies, and 5% of those who fail to do so due to some sort of difficulty end up attending one of the over 400 schools in which 41,000 students with different types of disabilities are prepared for their social inclusion.

In basic education, in the school year 2009-2010 the average student-teacher percentage was 9.8, and considering all educational levels, it rises to 10.3%.

A network of over 12,000 educational institutions is in operation throughout the country, comprising: childhood, basic, special, secondary, pre-university, technical-vocational, art, sport and adult education, with guaranteed access for the entire population.

In each province of the country there is a University of Pedagogical Sciences, and under its leadership the training of higher education professors covers the 169 existing municipalities.

More than 117,000 educators are enrolled in masters programs in Educational Sciences in those institutions, with more than 22,000 graduates. Over 900 professors have achieved a doctoral degree in one of the specialties. We must take into account the great internationalist vocation of the Revolution, which materialized in the form of educational assistance to hundreds of thousands of students from other countries, both in Cuba and in their own nations.

Higher education records very significant achievements, which have increased in each study period.

It should be recognized that despite these remarkable achievements there are still difficulties arising from the new historical conditions of the contemporary world. One of such difficulties is the need to reconcile the quality of education with the massive influx of students. Constant attention is needed to put education in tune with the requirements of each time, as pointed out by the José Martí.

Internationalism in education

The internationalism of Cuban education is expressed in the presence of large numbers of teachers and collaborators in other countries, such as the Ernesto Che Guevara Pedagogical Detachment in Angola (1978) and the Augusto César Sandino Detachment in Nicaragua (1980) among others.

The number of foreign students who attended secondary education on Isle of Youth is huge. They came from many countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Nicaragua. Special mention should be made of the International School of Medicine, founded in 1990, from which have graduated 8,585 professionals from 30 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Haiti and the United States, the latter with more than 40 doctors. Also to be highlighted is the International School of Sport, founded in 2000. Hundreds of thousands of students from different countries have attended its general and special courses in Cuba and are still in the professional development process. In 19 countries the implementation of “Yo sí puedo” (Yes I can) literacy method has taught 3.5 million people to read and write. Moreover, many specialists have provided educational collaboration to universities and educational and research centers.

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Abstract – This article analyzes the historical development of education in Cuba from 1959, the year of the triumph of the Revolution, to the present (2010). The text is divided into periods that reflect the problems facing education at each stage. By reviewing all levels of education (primary, secondary and higher) and emphasizing the processes that led to the creation of new institutions and the training of teaching professionals to cover the deficiencies that existed prior to the Revolution, this article portrays the evolution of Cuba's educational system – from the eradication of illiteracy in the 1960s to the plans for comprehensive education in general culture.

Keywords: Education, Comprehensive general culture, Revolution, Levels of education.

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