

THE IDEOLOGICAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF CUBAN EDUCATIONAL SCHOOLING

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To increase nationwide access and tighten state controls have been two key priorities of educational policies in Cuba since the early days of the revolution. These goals were largely achieved within a decade thanks to the implementation of some bold initiatives, which in effect transformed education, ensuring swift state monopoly. However, the implementation of educational reforms also brought about several contentious debates. One of the most controversial asked why the revolution devoted so much of its political capital and resources to shakeup schooling when the national literacy rate had shown signs of considerable improvement by 1958 with scores that surpassed the world average and all Caribbean neighbors, ranking Cuba the fifth-highest in literacy in all of Latin America. Even today, the ongoing discussions about the appropriate revolutionary aptitudes among university professors signal that many questions persist about the role of education and the extent to which educational institutions are expected to align with the political and economic climate of the island.

In this paper, I adopt a content analysis methodology to discern how political considerations permeate the hidden curriculum in the teaching of history. The concept of the hidden curriculum captures the repertoire of normative values, attitudes, and expectations embedded in curricular activities and the organizational principles of schools. Philip W. Jackson developed the notion in his 1968 manuscript *Life in Classrooms* to explain how students learned tacit norms and rituals in the classroom to fulfill institutional expectations. To be sure, in the case of Cuba, the ideo-

logical bias of education is not as hidden as in other nations. While educational policies and organizations have been researched copiously (see Carnoy and Samoff 1990, Lutjens 1999, and Bowles 1971, among others), few have investigated the cultural aspects of Cuban schools in-depth since Richard Fagen (1969). The moral life of schools often transcends institutions and manifest in societies, and for that reason, they are worth studying. M. Gabriela Vázquez Olivera (2015), for instance, recently demonstrated, in a provocative analysis of the effects of educational reforms in Chile and Mexico, how school policies later turned into mechanisms of social control.

Indulging into the normative realm of education also allows us to discern how norms and values cultivate glaring dispositions for national progress, as Max Weber (2002) demonstrated more than a century ago. More recently, sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) and researchers at The World Bank (2015), among others, correlated culture and social welfare explicitly. In this paper, I take one step further to try to understand how state-run educational institutions manipulate historical narratives to boost support for policies and even the legitimacy of the revolution. I assert that these goals materialize through three curricular processes, which I call *framing*, the overall logic of the historical narrative, *omission*, which serves to draw attention to the bias of specific historical selection, and *legitimation*, the depiction of the role of historical actors.

In addition to measuring content, the social effects of education are assessed by accounting for accessibility

and quality. The former is usually assessed by analyzing enrollment figures. By and large, when a sizeable and diverse portion of the student population enrolls in schools, we typically assume that education has positive social effects and is accessible because of its affordability, inclusiveness, general disposition for learning, or a combination of all these considerations. However, we cannot always assume there is complementarity in the factors that make schools accessible. In some cases, primary and secondary schooling may show evidence of two or more of these considerations, but, as some have argued, this is not necessarily the case concerning higher education where the range of available opportunities is more correlated with admissions priorities or even the socio-economic status of families¹. As I will argue later in the historical background section of the paper, judging from the number of schools opened and published enrollment figures, Cuban has performed exceptionally well on the accessibility score, albeit evidence of considerable political prerequisites to matriculate in some professional and university degree programs and the number of schools where the student population disproportionately represent the children of elite party members.

As part of its effort to expand opportunities, Cuba also established progressive vocational training programs to strengthen the capacity of individuals who did not enroll in higher educational institutions (*centros universitarios* and *centros de educación superior*). According to data published in the 2016 *Anuario Estadístico de Educación*, vocational training (*educación técnica y profesional*) declined considerably in recent years². Still, the decline in enrollment figures does not come anywhere near a reliable measurement of the full impact of schools on society.

A more robust but controversial social impact assessment criterion is measuring educational quality through graduation rates within reasonable termination dates. In many nations, including the United States, where higher education is not compulsory, the quality of university programs is usually calculated by completion rates within a six academic year bracket (Selingo 2012). Educational data published in 2015 by Cuba's Oficina Nacional de Estadística (ONE) documents consistently high student retention levels and enrollments, but the graduation rates are somewhat difficult to discern since they are not published by individual schools or weighted by the expected graduation dates of cohorts. Accordingly, researchers cannot reliably estimate the length of time required to finish professional and academic courses, the number of students who meet the on-time graduation requirement, or any institutional initiatives and resources dedicated to boost graduation³. Another related puzzle is that although figures are reported by provinces, and in most cases also by gender and institutional types, no other social attribute data of the student body, such as income, socio-economic status, or race, has ever been made public, perhaps to reinforce the carefully crafted egalitarian image the revolution publicly portrays.

Leaving aside any consideration about data validity, these figures should give us much to ponder about. It is usually the case that as educational institutions become more accessible and simultaneously show exceptional graduation rates, institutional academic prestige tends to get tarnished, since generous admissions coupled with high completion rates usually compromise academic selectivity ratings. This axiom is even more apparent in the case of Cuba, as ONE does not publish data about available supporting services to remediate underperformance among students or the amount of participation in intervention

1. The notable education and cultural critic Henry A. Giroux (2015) refers to this process as “the politics of disruption.”

2. Overall reported enrollment fluctuated from 238,921 in academic year 2010/11 to 197,581 in 2015/16. The number of teaching instructors decreased from 31,025 to 24,444 and the number of schools from 504 to 432 over the same academic years. See Anuario (2016) tables 18.5, 18.7, and 18.9, pp. 10–14.

3. According to ONE, nationwide retention rates remained consistent at 99% in primary schools between academic years 2011/12 and 2014/15, while among secondary school students retention only decreased by 3.5 percentage points (from 97.5% to 94.0%) in the same time frame.

programs by grade levels and cohorts. Consequently, it is very taxing to calculate the extent, if any, to which accommodations or remediation might contribute to degree completion.

Finally, the content criteria exposing ideological biases constitute the third measurement to assess the impacts of schools. Again, the effectiveness of this benchmark is practically impossible to examine across grade levels because, with very few exceptions, Cuba does not publish the content of its curriculums despite the effects of pedagogical and methodological practices on professional endeavors after graduation. A case in point is the kind of curricular sequence and Socratic method adopted by law schools to train lawyers on how to argue torts persuasively. The question then is how to uncover the implicit ideological biases in schools and why does it matter. As I discuss, and multiple studies convincingly demonstrate, a content analysis of educational materials is one of the most useful research strategies to conduct such investigation despite its limitations.

After this introduction, the rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly review the evolution of Cuban educational policies, particularly concerning access and their reception in historical perspectives. Second, I discuss the paper's methodology. Finally, in the last section, I discuss how the processes of framing, legitimation, and omission actually unfold.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A review of educational policies in Cuba after the revolution identifies two distinct epochal approaches to policy implementation. The first comprises the decade of the 60s, from the tumultuous early years after the new regime assumed power to the first Congress of Education and Culture held in April 1971. During these years, the priorities seem to have been the expansion and collective alignment of education. Many schools were built, other nationalized, and curricular activities and pedagogical practices were revamped to support the emerging revolutionary political culture. After 1971, a second phase of reforms (*perfeccionamientos*) was legislated to improve educational outcomes and reward academic excellence.

By the time the academic year 2010/11 came around, many of the initial efforts regarding the ex-

pansion of educational opportunities had paid off. The number of schools built reached a record high of 9,964, although the number declined by 531 five years later, and an impressive 50% of all schools were constructed outside major cities. The number of teachers also rebounded, reaching 316,118, after an initial decline in the number of qualified instructors principally due to migration in the period immediately after the establishment of the new regime. The total student population was reported at 2,425,186 students enrolled in schools nationwide, of which 8.3% resided in schools full-time (*becarios*) and 38.5% part-time (*seminternos*).

A few months before his death in 2017, in a candid chronicle of the early years of the revolution, Armando Hart, former Minister of Education (1959–1965) and Minister of Culture (1976–1997), one of the officials most directly responsible for implementing the revolution's educational policy, gave a rare glimpse of how and why educational reform became a centerpiece for the newly installed regime. According to Hart (2017), when he became Minister of Education in 1959, he was granted a mandate to transform education along five broad-based objectives: (1) to eradicate illiteracy altogether across the island; (2) to combine evidence-based instruction with revolutionary ethics and patriotic values inspired by national culture; (3) to strengthen popular participation in schools; (4) to knock down boundaries between the Education Ministry and revolutionary popular organizations; and (5) to decentralize educational institutions as much as possible to accomplish goals.

It is apparent that revolutionary leaders seized on their considerable popularity after the overthrow of the previous regime to quickly begin to implement radical changes to the educational system. Soon in 1960, in a speech at the UN General Assembly, Castro announced a national literacy campaign (*campaña de alfabetización*) to eliminate illiteracy nationwide. The implementation of this campaign, carried out a year later, was emblematic of how the Education Ministry would maneuver the use of popular mobilization and ideological zeal to accomplish its mandate during the first decade in power. Some 300,000 Cubans were recruited from throughout the

country to implement the campaign, teaching basic literacy skills and foreshadowing the ascendant ideology of the young revolution.

By all accounts, this unprecedented crusade was a success, literacy was practically eradicated, and the new regime gained additional popular support and enough political capital to move forward with its shrewd policies of consolidation and a tighter grip over schools. Three further initiatives guaranteed the capacity of the state to reach other school-age populations. The first was the establishment of public daycare centers (*Círculos Infantiles*), which, according to figures published by ONE, eventually expanded to enroll 137,454 children in 2015 alone. Through these centers, the state socialized preschoolers into educational dogmas even before they reached primary school. Daycare centers also restructured social roles within families as more women were incentivized to pursue employment outside the home. Moreover, on June 6 of 1961, the *Nacionalización General de la Enseñanza* legislation was enacted, effectively closing all private schools and universities throughout the country⁴. Finally, public school living arrangements (*internados*) were put in place, effectively separating *becarios* from their families for most of the school year.

As is often the case in Cuba, soon after these initial steps were instituted, there was a concerted attempt to induct students into Communist-controlled mass organizations through aggressive recruitment by state-sponsored student organizations such as the Pioneers (*Asociación de Pioneros de Cuba*) for elementary school children, the Communist Youth Union (*Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*, UJC) for middle school and high school students, and the Federation of University Students (*Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios*, FEU) to name a few. Membership in this well-structured pipeline network also became the source of social frictions, and even outright stigmatization, as militant student members were afforded more privileges and higher social status than their

peers. Finally, the decade of the sixties also witnessed an emphasis on the confluence of work and study with the introduction of the Schools to the Countryside Program (*escuelas al campo*) to relocate students to the countryside for a portion of the academic year to combine academic training with manual labor as promoted by Guevara's brand of socialism.

One last component of this outreach was the expansion of vocational training and adult education programs. According to figures published by ONE, before 1959, there were 304 evening schools operating throughout the island supporting 27,965 adult students, the majority studying to finish primary or secondary school. The number of adult learners increased throughout the years, and after the introduction of the *Curso de Superación Integral para Jóvenes* in 2001, enrollment in adult education programs skyrocketed to 373, 229 with about 74% of students originating in the countryside. (ONE).

The second phase of educational changes was denoted by the institutionalization of a set of reforms, usually referred to as *perfeccionamiento*, introduced in the 1971 national education congress. The new policies consisted of several pragmatic initiatives to stimulate higher graduation rates and increased attendance in post-secondary institutions. After 1976, with the establishment of the Red Nacional de Centros de Educación Superior, this period also witnessed the proliferation of many research institutions, policy development centers, and specialized institutes, some with university affiliations, tasked to foster a higher caliber of investigation and training, particularly in the arts and in public health, health sciences, and technical research. A case in point is the transformation witnessed in the type of preparation received by members of the elite diplomatic corps. Created on June 11, 1981, to train future foreign service professionals and diplomats, the Instituto Superior de Relaciones Internacionales "Raúl Roa García" was restructured to train around 1,200 graduate students in the fields of diplomacy, foreign affairs, inter-

4. According to a study published in *Palabra Nueva* (2018) by Brother Jesús Bayo M., FMS, by 1953, some 587 private schools served about 20% of the primary and secondary student population. There were 58,500 students enrolled in pre-schools (kindergartens) and the Catholic University of Santo Tomás de Villanueva opened its doors in 1946.

national political and economic relations, and other related subjects previously taught at its predecessor, the Instituto de Servicio Exterior, established on January 11, 1971.

There is no question that the considerable amount of reorganization introduced during these two decades supported the expansion of educational institutions. Ironically, access to new opportunities became highly stratified in most cases along ideological lines. Besides documenting scholarly merits, another requirement for students to meet when applying for admission to post-secondary programs was a demonstrable record of public (revolutionary) services and membership in the youth mass associations sponsored by the state. The fact that opportunities for professional attainment through education were exclusively channeled by state-sponsored institutions constitutes another illustration of how conformity configured the possibilities for social and professional mobility.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Content analysis is a research technique that counts the frequency and meaning of words and concepts to make inferences about the message conveyed by the text. Although admittedly controversial, the method assumes that the written word is a reliable depiction of the ideas promoted by the authors or institutions responsible for the content in the examined documents. In cases where educational materials must be approved by the state, one can safely assume that to one degree or another; state officials censor the study of history and delineate its content. Furthermore, the rigor of the content analytical strategy lends itself to comparative and trend analysis. And, finally, in situations where any other data sources are scarce or questionable, making inferences from officially approved transcripts becomes invaluable.

The method was first introduced in the social sciences during the 1940s to make sense of enemy propaganda during WWII. In the 1950s, de Sola Pool (1959), an expert on the role of technology on society, expanded its application to consider not merely the frequency of words in Cold War-related documents but also the semantic meaning and historical contextual significance of linguistics. Today, two general types of content analysis strategies are prac-

ticed, the contextual analysis and the relational analysis. The former measures the frequency of words and concepts to discern the structure of ideas and the biases of messages. In contrast, the relational type tries to establish relations between ideas in a given text by examining the frequency with which words are situated within a sentence to expose a more comprehensive meaning of entire communications.

The data gathered for this analysis consists of materials published in *Cubaeduca*, an internet portal run by the Cuban government to provide consistent study guides and lesson plans to prepare educators. The material is organized by grade levels according to primary, middle, and high school education. The site contains no data for post-secondary grades and higher education. Moreover, the instruction materials are divided according to five categories: Historical Themes (Temas), Learning Activities (Actividades de Aprendizaje), Documentation (Documentos para Historia de Cuba), Important Historical Figures (Figuras de la Historia) and Testing Preparation Materials (Preparación para la Prueba de Ingreso).

For this study, I focused the analysis on the first four rubrics and excluded test preparation. Moreover, I concentrated on materials supporting high schools. At the risk of reducing the amount of evidence for analysis, I decided to focus on high school materials following the assumption that teaching materials at this level will be more in-depth since students had already acquired some foundational basis in previous grades. Within high schools, the teaching of history is organized as follows. In 10th grade, it focuses on general 20th-century world history and the history of the Americas since before the discovery. In grade 11th, on “the nationalist formation of the Cuban people.” And in grade 12th, on revolution and resistance between 1953 and 1958 and then on the revolutionary regime in power after 1959.

With regard to methodology steps, I proceeded as follows. After loading the files outlying the topics of historical study on to the ATLAS, TI software for analysis, I discerned organizational patterns to identify major themes in the documentation. The idea was to reveal the logic of the historical narrative to help us understand the biases and ideological bend associ-

ated with the teaching of history to Cuban high school students. I completed the content analysis portion of the paper with an analysis of key historical documents and the profile of leaders highlighted in *Cubaeduca*.

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

This portion of the paper discusses how the general trends and findings identified by the content analysis support the three mechanisms of curricular interpretations—framing, omission, and legitimation—I identified earlier with respect to the field of high school history teaching. To reiterate a point I made earlier, since the field of history reflects how we conceive our national identities, to examine several overall general messages associated with how history is taught during the formative years of school illustrate the attempts by state officials to define how we conceive the national ethos. This, of course, does not mean those attempts always succeed.

Framing

In his pathbreaking book *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman (1974) discusses how organizations, individuals, and other social actors depict everyday reality for public consumption. In this work, Goffman was concerned with the integrity of representation and also with the extent to which the presentation of experiences constitutes an articulation of specific interests. Defining the overall course of historical narrative is one of the most effective strategies the Cuban regime has employed to control the national political debate and delineate political boundaries.

An analysis of how history is taught in schools demonstrates that the development of Cuban national identity is framed in terms of persistent tensions and confrontations between two forces, an external enemy consistently attempting to oppress the island nation and several rising nationalist leaders and movements struggling to free the country from foreign domination. Admittedly, depicting history in such nationalistic terms is not necessarily unique to the Cuban experience. What sets this narrative apart is the sharp difference in which Cuba history in the 19th and 20th centuries is depicted when it comes to its external relations. For instance, when the themes concerning the struggle for independence were intro-

duced in fifth-grade history, it concentrates on 19th-century events, and the words conquest and occupation tend to characterize the Spanish colonial experience. It is not until students tackled the Republic that such words as colonialism and tyranny appear to describe the 20th-century American presence on the island.

The topic of the insurgency against Batista was introduced at this latter grade level. It is represented in terms of a continuous struggle for national independence dating back to the many uprisings against Spain concluding with the 1959 revolution. What is more, while the path line of upheavals since the Ten-Years War against Spain episode is portrayed as a courageous but frustrating struggle, Castro's revolutionary insurgency is depicted as a new phase of the fight (*una nueva etapa de la lucha*) and one that continues until it is successful (*la lucha continúa hasta el triunfo definitivo*). The word triumph is solely reserved for this occasion, rendering unduly the political gains of preceding nationalist efforts.

Another glaring aspect of the framing is the characterization of the Republican years before 1959. Every government during the Republican period, irrespectively of how it rose to power, how it ruled, or the amount of popular support it enjoyed, was branded a tyranny. The implication of this historical oversimplification is, of course, to associate the Republic with an illegitimate effort imposed from abroad and to stamp in heroic terms those who spearheaded protests during the Republican years. Perhaps no other statement illustrates this idea more clearly than the following description of the 1959 revolution:

El día 8 entra en La Habana, con el pueblo volcado en las calles, la Caravana de la Libertad procedente de Santiago de Cuba y Fidel interviene en Columbia. La Revolución cubana respondía a una necesidad histórica. Habían fracasado los caminos del reformismo burgués y la dictadura batistiana confirmó, sin proponérselo, que la única alternativa era la guerra necesaria, generosa y breve para refundar la República, ahora sí, con las ideas del Apóstol. (<http://historia.cubaeduca.cu/el-gobierno-revolucionario>)

Lastly, it is also interesting to observe how 12th graders are taught about the political and economic policies of the revolution. As one might expect, the un-

derlying theme of victimization is very much a part of this narrative, as is the personality cult to Fidel. Particular emphasis is placed on the decision to reorganize the ruling Communist Party in 1965 and center all political activities under the authority of a single party, which is justified as a mere necessity to present a united front against an overpowering adversary who had already demonstrated its imperialistic intentions over the course of the Republican period preceding the 1959 revolution. Furthermore, this political arrangement, according to the lesson plan, is regarded as an exemplar of democracy, for the consolidation process that unfolded offered more opportunities to every citizen to actively participate. As the lesson plan states, “las modificaciones ocurridas en el aparato estatal entre 1961 y 1965 dieron más participación a las masas en las gestiones del gobierno.”

Omission

By omission, I mean precisely that. Every process of framing guides us to identifiable boundaries, or analytical frameworks, that exclude a selective group of historical events and interpretations from the focus of analysis. When interpretative boundaries consistently dismiss specific facts, as is evident in the depiction of the Republican and Revolutionary years, one must conclude there is evidence of partiality.

For the 10th grade, the process of omission is most evident in the guidelines about how to teach about the situation in Europe after WWII. Remarkably, the foreign policies of Western powers, primarily the United States, towards Western European reconstruction are explained in terms of support for Western economic and political ambitions without any references to the aggressive expansion of the Soviet Union toward Eastern Europe and even the Mediterranean. According to this account, Stalin and the rest of the Soviet leadership did not play any role in provoking the formulation of containment and the Truman Doctrine.

Students in this grade are also exposed to a module that examines Latin America’s political economy after 1898. In this case, even the most profound changes that took place in the region are regarded as reformist or “reformismo burgués.” Many historical events are not even considered, principally among

them the promise to foment revolutions to destabilize neighboring states throughout Latin America by the Castro regime, the more recent consolidation of democracy which set aside several leftist governments in the region, the amounts of foreign assistance and community based programs pouring in, or even the increased diversification of economic relations around Latin American nations.

The portion dedicated to the history of Cuba is equally one-sided. The political uprising against Batista is explained to students exclusively by the actions taken by Fidel, as if no other of his contemporaries ever organized or demonstrated against governments in power eventually provoking the *caudillo*. For the education of 10th and 11th graders, the post-depression period on the island was nothing more than a continuous series of dismal policy failures and mistakes. Political leaders are all labeled as neocolonialist reformers supporting the interests of the upper-class. Alternative social organizations, like the Church, are invisible in this narrative. Finally, after 1959, there is no evidence of any policy mistakes by revolutionary leaders. And no mention either of the consistent arbitrary abuse of power to repress the population and crush dissent.

Finally, no other evidence best reflects the exercise of omission than the list of parallel learning materials published by the contributors to *Cubaeduca*. Among the list of significant historical figures, almost all (89%) are depicted favorably in the official political rhetoric. Among the learning activities, 2 of 4 are directly related to revolutionary themes in 10th grade. Conversely, in the 11th and 12th all the activities listed related to the revolutionary struggles of the Cuban nation. Finally, all the documents recommended for further study support the revolutionary ideology. All of this is evidence that the curriculum leaves no room for critical thinking and revisionism.

Legitimation

The last of the curricular mechanisms considers how interpretive frameworks and repeated omissions come to support the posture defined by the leaders of the revolution. Throughout this analysis, one can surmise that Cuban history is represented as a continuous struggle against foreign aggression, first

during colonial times and later by American nepotism. Nationalist forces failed to change the structures of foreign domination until Castro appeared on the scene. Events leading to the 1959 revolution constitute a true effort of emancipation—whatever foreign interests continued to meddle in national affairs have been deterred by the tenacity and heroic bravery of Cuban nationals.

There are several reasons why this message legitimizes the current political culture. First, it justifies existing political arrangements as indispensable to safeguard the integrity of the Cuban nation. Second, it attempts to discredit any internal opposition or dissent as acting against the interest of the people. Third, at a more academic level, it encourages consent and devalues critical inquiries on the part of students. Fourth, there is a concerted attempt to oversimplify bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba, and this consistent message may cloud any goodwill between the two countries. Finally, Russia is presented as the reliable ally, justifying the close, albeit occasional edgy, relations between the two nations.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper attempts to show the degree of politicization of education in Cuba. Of the three criteria usually employed to assess educational programs, it is

rather obvious that the most politicized is the area of educational content. An analysis of how Cuban schools teach history to middle and high school students demonstrates this assertion. About 20% of the island's population is reportedly 14 years old or younger. Demographic data alone shows that as limited as my evidence is, it still reaches a significant portion of the overall population of the island. When one considers, also, that secondary education is monopolized by the state and directly aims to contribute to the political worldview of generations of students during their formative years, the political effect multiplies. Moreover, the evidence I present in this paper should be considered an invitation for further research. The *Cubaeduca* portal is one of the few that lends a rare glimpse of curricular materials.

If there is any value in this research it is that it demonstrates how political effects unfold to support the historical interpretations convenient to attempt to legitimize revolutionary politics these days. As John Dewey warned us back in 1907, to understand the role of schools in society, one needs to transcend individualized needs associated with the ties between schools and individual families. There should be no doubt that schooling is a social arrangement that reflect the social milieu in which it takes place.

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