The Children of Cuba

Gwendolyne Coe and Judith Lynne McConnell

The home of salsa, Cohiba cigars, horse-drawn taxi wagons, and fruit-laden farmers’ markets . . . Cuba, the land of glorious sunsets and smiling children, where “Everything is almost possible.” From January 15–22, 2001, People to People International (www.ptpi.org), located in Kansas City, Missouri, sponsored the Early Childhood Education Delegation to Cuba. Since the founding of People to People International in 1956 by President Eisenhower, its goal has been to promote world peace through high-level professional exchanges with other countries. Our delegation received a license to travel to Cuba from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and we visited the cities of Havana, Cienfuegos, and Varadero. Nineteen early childhood educators and three guests representing 14 states were about 1,160 child care centers operating for children six months to five years of age (Gasperini 1999, 22). Considering both of these strategies, Cuban early education programs reach more than 98 percent of children under six (UNICEF 2001). According to Gasperini, “Comprehensive early childhood and student health services, widespread literacy, adult, and nonformal education programs support the objectives of basic education for all” (1999, 5).

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Early education and care in Cuba

Education is a top priority in Cuba. The curriculum is standardized at a national level and attendance is compulsory from ages 6 to 11. In 1992, with support from UNICEF, Cuba started a national program of community-based services for young children and their families (UNICEF 2001). As of 1994, there were about 1,160 child care centers operating for children six months to five years of age (Gasperini 1999, 22). Considering both of these strategies, Cuban early education programs reach more than 98 percent of children under six (UNICEF 2001). According to Gasperini, “Comprehensive early childhood and student health services, widespread literacy, adult, and nonformal education programs support the objectives of basic education for all” (1999, 5).
During the first three years of secondary education, students often go to boarding schools in the countryside, which combine classroom instruction with work such as agricultural labor. Subsequently, children may attend a pre-university or technical school followed by one year of military service.

**Arts in early education**

After Fidel Castro assumed power in 1959, the arts and literature became a major focus for the Cuban government. A system of art schools was established within cultural centers. The cultural centers were created for three purposes: (1) to guide and supervise museums, art galleries, movie theaters, and libraries; (2) to provide music, dance, drama, and art instruction; and (3) to instill moral, social, and political values through the arts. School-age children are required to attend classes in the arts a minimum of six hours a week after the regular school day.

Music is the heart and soul of Cuban culture. In the words of our guide, “There is music everywhere. We need music for living.” Spanish guitars and African drums contributed to the creation of salsa, a music form developed in the 1700s by the enslaved people living in Cuba.

During our visit to the town of Cienfuegos, we enjoyed ballet, dramatic theater, and clown performances by young children at a government-sponsored center serving 13 neighborhoods. The first performance we observed was by a group of eight-year-old girls dancing to the song “Legend of Love” played on a small tape player. The young dancers were classically dressed in black leotard and tights and white ballet shoes tied with satin ribbon. Their hair was tied in buns, red flowers encircling each. Around their waists they wore long sheer white skirts with ruffled hems. They danced with large decorated hoops. The performance was enchanting.

Next, we observed a small art room where children made drawings with colored pencils. Children were crowded around a single table and seated on
chairs with rebar frames and plywood seats. A bulletin board displayed pencil drawings dedicated to Jose Marti’s birthday. Jose Marti is a hero to Cuba’s children. He was the mastermind behind the war for independence from Spain and is well known for his poetry and prose. His most famous poem, “The White Rose,” was set to music in the ever-popular song “Guantanamera.”

Professor Silvia, our local guide, explained to us that children’s art is related to Cuban history and culture and that art is an educational priority. Cubans are very proud of their artists because their work is a means of representing their country to the rest of the world.

On the open-air rooftop patio of the center we were entertained with a drama or folklórico. The dramatic arts instructor explained that the characters in the play were significant in Santería, a religion that is a mixture of the beliefs of the Yoruba people of West Africa, enslaved in Spanish Cuba during the eighteenth century, and Catholicism. Each child in the play wore special colors and used props (bow, broom, scythe) to depict the attributes of a special saint. One young girl was dressed in a yellow gown and wore a gold crown representing the Virgin of Charity and the Spirit of Copper. We were invited to join the children, contributing our own rhythm and movements to the dance. Our visit concluded with poetry recitations, a comedy complete with clowns, and a unique “drawing while dancing” participation including the children and our delegation.

Throughout our tour, the lack of space and materials for the visual arts was evident. We did not see paints, paintbrushes, colored paper, scissors, or sculpting materials in the child care centers, schools, and community centers that we visited. In a primary school in Havana, we did observe one display of children’s artworks constructed from available recycled materials, including plastic water bottles and aluminum beer cans.

**Literacy in education**

To understand literacy education in Cuba’s schools today, it is helpful to understand the history of literacy education since the revolution.

**The Literacy Campaign of 1961**

Early one morning our delegation boarded a bus that took us through Cuidad de Libertad (the City of Liberty) section of Havana to the Museo
Nacional de la Campaña de Alfabetización, a museum dedicated to Cuba’s Literacy Campaign of 1961. The museum’s director, Luisa Campos, gave us a guided tour of the museum’s artifacts.

After the fall of Fulgencio Batista’s government in 1959, there was an exodus of the intellectual and technical elite. In reaction to this exodus, in 1961 Castro instituted an islandwide literacy campaign using literate adults and children to teach their fellow citizens to read and write.

The Literacy Campaign involved more than 250,000 Cuban citizens—housewives, laborers, and children, some as young as 11. Regular schools were closed for eight months while these brigades of people, known as brigadistas, worked as teachers. These new teachers received an intensive 10-day training course and an instruction guide, Alfabeticemos (Let us alphabetize). In addition, one book for the potential students, Venceremos (We will win), was distributed to each of the new teachers. The motto of the Literacy Campaign was “If you know, teach; if you don’t know, learn.”

During the day the literacy volunteers worked the land with the farm families, and at night they taught them how to read and write. The rural population certainly did learn. Eleven months after the beginning of the campaign, the national illiteracy rate was reduced from 26.3 percent to 3.9 percent. Now, 45 years after the revolution, Cuba boasts a 97 percent literacy rate (CIA 2004).

Classroom in a garage

Visiting schools was the highlight of our trip. Prior to our arrival, People to People International arranged permission for us to visit schools through the Cuban Minister of Education. In Havana our most memorable visit was to Escuela Primaria, a school for approximately 400 students in grades 1 through 4.

The building was located in a neighborhood of Spanish-style homes constructed in the 1950s. On the walls throughout the school were many posters proclaiming the importance of “the collective” as well as pictures of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Most of the 10 classrooms we saw measured about 12 by 14 feet. Paint was peeling off the walls and the tile floors were stained from years of not being waxed. Of the 10 rooms we saw, three had no electricity (wires hanging with open sockets). Those rooms with electricity were dimly lit by long fluorescent lightbulbs (Reed 2001).
## Reflections on Cuba

We remember . . .  
- a nationalized educational curriculum.  
- the focus on the arts in a child’s total development. “We must have music to live!”  
- the value placed on paper, crayons, pencils, paints, and reading books.  
- a literacy rate of 97 percent.  
- the government’s political and moral messages in required texts.  
- the absence of school libraries or books for casual reading.  
- the rationing of food. Faith Bieler and Ann Martin report, “At present, there is a quota system with an allotment every three months of one soap per person, one quart of cooking oil (not fat), one quarter of a chicken for each child up to 13 years old, milk only for children up to six years old, and beef only allowed one time per year.” To purchase milk, butter, or sugar, Cubans need U.S. dollars, not pesos (2001, 25).

## . . . and the United States

We ask . . .  
- Should U.S. schools increase their focus on the arts for the development of the whole child?  
- Do we purchase too many commercial materials?  
- Would the U.S. literacy rate increase with a family-focused initiative?  
- Do our textbooks contain subtle social and political messages?  
- Do U.S. citizens appreciate and fully use school and public libraries?  
- Do we appreciate our abundance of food and resources?  
- What was your reaction to learning that Cuba has a national curriculum?  
- Will statewide assessments lead to a national curriculum?  
- How would having a national curriculum affect your teaching practice?
We were led from the school building into a converted two-car garage that served as a classroom. The children were friendly and did their best to communicate with us. Those in the Pioneer program, a children’s group sponsored by the Communist Party, wore white and red or white and blue uniforms. The children sat two to a desk, side-by-side, while the teacher facilitated a reading activity in a gentle and kind manner. The teacher-directed reading activity was similar to those activities developed for the Literacy Campaign of 1961.

During the campaign and in the teacher’s current instructional book, reading activities included the following three steps:

1. **The children look at and discuss the pictures in their readers.** All story themes are politically based, encouraging children to practice the values learned from the revolution and to learn to live as a patriot in a socialist country.

2. **The teacher reads the text aloud to the children, and then they read it together in unison.** Next she asks the children comprehension questions about what was read. Each child reads portions of the text aloud, and the class analyzes the individual’s reading for mistakes.

3. **The children copy portions of the text in their writing books.**

   After viewing this reading activity, we wondered if it was representative of what children at other schools experienced. We were told that Cuba has a nationalized curriculum, with all Cuban children of the same grade completing the same readings and activities on the same day. The children’s progress in each subject area is evaluated quarterly and again at the end of the semester when both the children and the teachers are evaluated through state-provided final exams. Throughout Cuba the classroom teacher’s performance and salary are based on student promotion rates (Worthman & Kaplan 2001).

   At the end of our visit to Escuela Primaria, we distributed picture books, tennis balls, and art materials. The children were most excited about receiving the books. While exiting through the director’s office, we read a quotation hanging on the wall: “Although it is important to have friends, it is more important to have enemies, for without enemies there would be limited opportunities for change”—an interesting reflection for teachers in Cuba and in the United States.

**Conclusion**

Cuba is more than salsa and cigars; it is a country of children with smiling faces, dancing feet, and minds rooted in political teachings. These children practice their reading and love the gift of a book as much as that of a ball. They are the future for their families and their country, and through them Cuba will continue to grow.
More on the Arts in Cuba . . .

Ballet is an important art form to the children and families of Cuba. The Cuban National Ballet is respected around the world and its Pro Danza Vocational School of Dance offers programs for anyone four years old and older. Every year approximately 1,500 children attend dance courses at community centers throughout the country. Baby Ballet is offered for children ages four to seven and Pre Ballet for children ages eight to fourteen. At the conclusion of each six-month course children perform for their parents and members of their community. In 2002, the National Ballet School offered a Special Dance Workshop for 4,000 children from all of the municipalities in Havana. Not surprisingly, 41,000 applications were received. The 37,000 children who did not qualify for that workshop were registered for dance appreciation workshops.

Theatrical arts also flourish in Cuba. Isolated from the opportunity to read about and to witness artistic developments in other countries, Cuban thespians have been forced to rely on their own ingenuity, creativity, and innovation. Two examples of this ingenuity are Teatro de los Elementos (Theater of the Elements) and La Colmenita (The Little Hive).

The Teatro de los Elementos in Cienfuegos combines theater and nature into a strong and original artistic experience. La Colmenita, the world-renowned National Children’s Theater Company of Cuba, has grown into a network of grassroots regional theaters offering an avenue for serious artistic expression to 10,000 Cuban children, including those with disabilities. The troupe was invited to the United States in 2001 to perform in five California cities. La Colmenita reciprocated by inviting a children’s creative arts group from Los Angeles to collaborate in writing and performing a play at the National Theater of Cuba. This collaborative experience is documented for young readers in the book Reaching for the Sun: Kids in Cuba by Trish Marx.

The International Amateur Theatre Association (IATA) held its Eighth World Children’s Theater Festival in Havana from July 19–25, 2004, the first time the event has taken place in the Western hemisphere. Cuba received $50,000 from UNESCO to support this program of cultural exchange and dialogue between 900 children and chaperones from 25 countries. The festival emphasized art in the holistic development of the child as an important element of cultural diversity.

The Cuban government supports the arts in their country and through participation in international associations. Educa a tu hijo (Educate your child) is a community-based program funded by UNICEF. Families from Central Havana gather twice a week for cultural and sporting activities in their local park. A short video clip about the participation of one Cuban family, “Josette’s Tale,” demonstrates key UNICEF messages about child participation in making a world fit for children. (Visit www.unicef.org/sowc03/contents/chilparticipation.html for more information.)

References


