Learning ‘To Be Somebody’

Cuban Youth in the Special Period

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Abstract

This paper reports on a survey of secondary school students in three schools in Havana, Cuba, conducted by the author in 1995. Two major themes identified in the survey data are elaborated: 1) A belief in schooling as preparation for work; and 2) A desire “to be somebody”. The survey results are considered in terms of a progressive critique of schooling from within Cuba, identifying features in common with schools in capitalist societies, and a broader world-system perspective on the development of mass secondary schooling.

The qualitative and quantitative survey data reported in the paper are set in the context of Cuba’s “Special period”, official warnings of a “crisis of youth values”, and the emerging critique of schooling in revolutionary Cuba in the post-Soviet period. It is argued that students’ responses highlight the instrumental function of schooling to prepare ‘good workers’, and students’ desire for socio-economic advancement via formal education, in line with the world-system critique of school education in socialist Cuba. In this way the paper contributes to an understanding of Cuba’s revolutionary schools within the post-Soviet, capitalist world-system.

Keywords: Cuban Secondary Schools, Special Period, Youth Survey, World-systems analysis

Introduction

By the mid 1990s the full impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and socialist trading bloc (CMEA), was being experienced in all areas of social life in Cuba. Along with the social and economic restructuring driven by the officially designated “Special Period”, a more open level of public debate, not seen since the late 1960s, was encouraged to help develop a progressive way forward for the Cuban Revolution. In this context the role of school education in preparing young people for the revolutionary project came under scrutiny, linked to an official recognition of a “crisis of values” amongst the youth. The emerging critique highlighted some systemic failures in school education, after more than thirty years of overtly politicised schooling intended to develop socialist values and attitudes in the new generations.

This paper begins with a review of the context of the Special Period in the mid-1990s within which the critique of school education emerged. Data from a survey of secondary school students completed in 1995 is then analysed, and two major themes discussed: 1) the belief in schooling as preparation for work; and 2) the desire “to be somebody”. The survey results are considered in terms of the critique of schooling from within Cuba, and a broader world-system perspective on the development of mass secondary schooling, contributing to the interpretation of the student survey data.

Revolutionary School Education in the Special Period

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc of “real existing socialism”, Cuba entered what was officially designated a “Special Period in Time of Peace” in which the country confronted the massive economic dislocation associated with the end of the CMEA and associated trade agreements with the socialist countries (Monreal 2001; Pastor Jr and Zimbalist 1995b; Castro 1991). Between 1989 and 1993 the national economy experienced negative growth, with GNP contracting by some 45% and imports falling by around two-thirds (Carranza-Valdés et al. 1995, pp. 18-19; Lage 1995). The loss of sources for spare parts from the CMEA had significant effects on industry, while the end of the historic “sugar for oil” trade arrangements with the Soviet Union in particular brought major oil shortages that impacted transport and electricity generation (Pollitt and Hagelburg 1994), causing frequent and extended blackouts for much of the population.1

1 The heat of the summer of August 1994, exacerbated by blackouts leaving electric fans and fridges unable to operate, compounded the general socio-economic uncertainty and led to public protests in Havana (see Dilla Alfonso 2003a; Blanco 2003b). The social unrest targeted an international Tourist Hotel in Old Havana, symbolising the sharp contrast between the relative luxury contained in this growing sector of the national economy and that of everyday Cuban citizens. Tourism was and remains an essential part of Cuba’s new economy, given the need to capture hard currency for essential imports, capital investment,
The seriousness of the crisis faced by revolutionary Cuba in the early 1990s can hardly be overstated. In this context, and in sharp contrast with the conventional “structural adjustment” programs of the IMF implemented in many countries of Latin America (Petras and Morley 1992), a series of economic reforms were implemented as part of the broader program of the “Special Period”. The reforms were aimed at achieving national economic recovery whilst maintaining the significant social achievements of the Cuban Revolution, including public education, health-care, housing, and guaranteed basic food rations (see Reed 1992). Reforms included the legalisation of hard currency and regulated self-employment, the re-emergence of “Free Farmers Markets” in which excess produce from State and private farms was sold at market prices, and direct foreign investment in new export-oriented industries like Tourism (Carranza-Valdés et al. 1995; Valdés Paz 2001; Monreal 2001).

Schools experienced serious difficulties and challenges in the Special Period, the most immediate being shortages of basic resources like books, pens and paper. The economic crisis similarly impacted on all aspects of school infrastructure including building construction and maintenance, meals and transport for staff and students, etcetera. An authentic political commitment to school education meant that scarce resources were dedicated to keeping the national system of mass public schooling operating. Such a commitment, however, could not exempt schools from the material difficulties being experienced across all sectors.

More critically, large numbers of teachers were leaving the profession in search for more financially rewarding work, putting further strains on the system (see Pérez Izquierdo 1998; Espina Prieto 2003). With the unofficial exchange rate running between 80 and 150 Cuban pesos to the US dollar, and opportunities to earn US dollars in self-employment and/or new industries linked to foreign ventures and tourism, material incentives to work as a teacher for a salary of between 250-350 Cuban pesos / month evaporated. Between 1994 and 1996 the total number of teachers in the system fell by 56,700 as teachers moved to “the emerging mixed sector of the economy, as well as the private sector [cuenta propia], in search of increased wages” (Pérez Izquierdo 1998, p. 128). The departure of teachers was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of students dropping out of the secondary school sub-systems. From the 1993-1994 enrolments in the basic secondary, pre-university and technical sub-systems, 29,412 students were recorded as dropping out of the systems (Pérez Izquierdo 1998, p. 134), driven also by the complex socio-economic prospects and changes confronting the youth.

Debate in the Special Period

A renewed openness for political discussion and debate, not seen since the 1960s, emerged in Cuba as a further strategy in the search for a progressive way out of the Special Period and articulation of socialism for Cuba in the post-Soviet 1990s. The discussion extended beyond the field of economic recovery to social and political studies. This was reflected in the content of established and new (and in some cases the re-emergence of old) journals like *Temas, Contracorriente, Cuadernos de Nuestra America* from the Centre of American Studies, and *Acuario* from El Centro Félix Varela. Reflecting on the “timid, but real opening” that occurred following the unrest of August 1994, the founding President of the ‘Félix Varela Centre’, Juan Antonio Blanco (2003a), notes that:

We believed that “another, improved socialism was possible in Cuba”. They were configuring the embryo of a different and multidimensional vision of national security (p. 1).

It was in this context of a more open and critical analysis of multiple aspects of the Cuban revolutionary project, and its way forward, that some formal acknowledgement of a crisis of (socialist) youth values, and the possible role played by school education in this crisis, emerged.

A Survey of Secondary School Students, 1995

In this context, a quantitative and qualitative survey was prepared and administered to Year 9 students in 1995 by the author. The survey was administered in three secondary schools, in a total of four Year 9 classes, for a total sample of 115 students. This sample was made up of: 57 students...
from two Year 9 classes in one urban basic secondary school; 33 students in one Year 9 class in a second urban basic secondary school; and 25 students in one Year 9 class in one polytechnical school.7

The survey asked students in their last year of compulsory secondary schooling about: their future educational and occupational preferences, reasons for their choices and the influence of the social and economic context on these decisions; the factors contributing to educational success; the objectives of school education; the practice of work-study; new socio-economic inequalities emerging in the Special Period; and their fears for the future.

Two major themes identified from the survey data are elaborated below, and interpreted in terms of the then emergent critique of schooling from within Cuba, and a broader world-system perspective on mass education: 1) Support for the concept of schooling as preparation for work; and 2) A desire “to be somebody” via the attainment of educational credentials and subsequent career path.

Schooling as Preparation for Work

Schooling as preparation for work has been a major feature in the historical development of mass school education in Cuba, to be achieved by sorting and selecting students into particular career paths, and instilling in them a conscious work ethic tied to a politicised objective of rapid national economic development.8 The objective was tied to what Chase-Dunn (1982) describes as nations’ attempts to achieve “national upward mobility in the world-system,” (p.37), albeit with a socialist system of distribution, that was a defining feature of the revolutionary project in Cuba (for the world-system perspective see Chase-Dunn, 1982, and also Wallerstein 1995b; 1994). Such an approach is not surprising given the nature of the Cuban Revolution and the context in which it triumphed.

Given the explicit politicisation of school education in revolutionary Cuba, such goals of schooling were consistently expressed in formal policy as part of students’ political formation, seeking for example to instil in the youth a “communist attitude towards work”, within which “a very important element of work is discipline” (García Gallo 1967, p. 11). Similarly, the first Congress of Solidarity with the People of Latin America affirmed that the emerging schools in the countryside would:

Form and develop in students attitudes, habits and abilities that are relevant to the economic and social development of the country ... [and promote] ... a communist consciousness with respect to work ... [and] ... an effective vocational, occupational and professional formation (Primer Congreso de Solidaridad de los Pueblos de América Latina 1968, p. 125).

The Congress added that a significant point of departure of the revolutionary government’s educational policy continued to be:

… the integration or correlation that must be maintained between education and the plans for the economic and social development of the country, in accordance with the changes the revolutionary process has brought (Primer Congreso de Solidaridad de los Pueblos de América Latina 1968, pp. 128-29).

This policy was institutionalised in the “Schools in the Countryside” model of secondary schooling established in the 1970s, and continued to be expressed in formal policy across key moments in the development of the revolutionary project. The official line continued into the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 1986, affirming the objective of strengthening the “work-study link in all its forms and at all levels of education,” in order to achieve a better “vocational formation and professional orientation of students” (Partido Comunista de Cuba 1986, p. 131).

Support for the idea that a primary objective of schooling should be preparation for work emerged in the survey data. Question 11 of the survey asked students to nominate what should be the principal objective of secondary schooling from the options listed in Table 1 below (see Appendix). The option to select more than one objective was provided, in which case students were asked to number their selections in order of importance. The frequency of first choice responses, from highest to lowest, are shown in Table 1.

Students’ responses clearly indicate that there was most support for the objective of preparation for work, accounting for 42.9% of first choices. The second most popular option of preparing students to continue the construction of socialism seems to support the explicit politicisation of school education and the objective of students’ political formation. In the context of Cuba’s long-standing articulation of the revolutionary project in terms of rapid social and economic development, this result can be read as evidence of the politicisation of the youth. It is also consistent with, and closely tied to, the goal of preparing students for work, given that the emphasis on the national development project in the concept of students’ political formation. In contrast, only 4.8% of students chose as the primary objective the more radical political objective of

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7 Permission for the school visits and surveys was obtained from the Ministry of Education, and a list of potential schools provided by the Ministry. The final choice of schools was determined by logistical travel considerations of the author (transport by bicycle), and a desire to include students from at least two subsystems (urban basic secondary and polytechnical) in Cuba’s compulsory lower-secondary system.

8 For a full review of the historical development of school education in Cuba, from a world-systems perspective, see Griffiths (1998).
“teach you socialist values and attitudes like solidarity, collective work, etc”.

The three main responses, accounting for almost 80% of first choices, can in this way be interpreted as inter-related support for the idea that a primary objective of their schooling should be to prepare students for their future working career, this in turn contributing to the revolutionary program for national development.

These results provide some primary data supporting a developing, progressive critique, at the time, of an overly instrumental conceptualisation of schooling at the expense of a more radical emphasis on the promotion of socialist values and attitudes amongst the youth (Mari Lois 1995a, 1995b; Blanco 1995a, 1995b). In the context of the official acknowledgement of a crisis of youth values, Mari Lois (1995a) articulated the critique as follows:

To establish the “preparation for work” is a step that responds to practical necessities, but it requires more precision. The modern school has always involved “preparation for work”, capitalism does this. That which distinguished one society from the other is the complete set of values by which the individual is exhorted to carry out their social labour.

The application of an inadequate or confused definition of the goals of education, frequently copied from the countries of Eastern Europe over almost two decades, could also be added to the fall of that false paradigm (p. 8).9

Juan Antonio Blanco (1995b) similarly highlighted the apparent convergence with school systems in capitalist societies evident in this feature of Cuba’s schools:

For example, one of the elements that we, I believe, imported into the country, was the element that the whole school systems’ goal was supposed to be to prepare people to become workers. Well, I don’t see the difference with capitalism. In capitalism you also prepare people to become workers. If they get a job or not that’s a different story, but you are supposed to teach them to excel as excellent workers.

This critique of schooling was linked to a more general reassessment of the experience of “real existing socialism” and its influence, via the Soviet Union, on Cuba’s revolutionary project (for some examples of this critique see Blanco 1995a; Alonso-Tejada 1995; Martinez Heredia 1995a).10

Further evidence of students’ belief in the idea of schooling as preparation for work is seen in their qualitative responses to Question 12 of the survey, asking them to identify their three main fears for the future. A significant theme to emerge from responses to this question was a concern from students that they would not be able to enter or complete their preferred post-compulsory education and training pathway, and/or not be able to realise their chosen career. Such expressions were frequently linked to a fear of that they would not “be somebody” in their life, encompassing their future socio-economic status (see below). Some examples of the expressed post-school fears for the future of students include the following:

Not to work in my chosen occupation, build a home and family (Pharmacist, S1.12)

To be able to continue my studies, to work in my desired career (Medical Doctor, S2.03)

Have a good wage to maintain my family, to have an independent house (Physicist, S2.20)

To be somebody in the future, to have a good job with a good salary (Tourism Industry, S3.03)11

Responses like these reinforce the argument that students saw schools as preparing them for their future working lives. The strength of this perception evident here, and in students’ direct responses on the primary objective of schooling, suggests that schooling was valued in terms of its potential contribution to their personal social mobility. Such an outcome needs to be read in the context of students’ radical political formation having arguably been reduced to the hollow repetition of slogans as a result of the institutionalised Soviet model in the 1970s (see for example Valencia Almeida 1995; Sexto 1995; Santana-Castillo 1995), this in turn perhaps contributing to the weak support for the notion of schooling to teach socialist values and attitudes. In this way, the survey results lend some support to the broader argument that schools were functioning to promote goals of individual advancement and the achievement of personal socio-economic status, at the expense of more radical political values.

A Desire “to be Somebody”

The most consistent theme to emerge from students’ qualitative responses was their expressed desire “to be somebody in life”, in which the idea of “being somebody” was directly associated with their post-compulsory schooling, achievement of their chosen

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9 This text records an intervention by Mari Lois, in the name of the Félix Varela Centre, to the national Parliamentary Commission of Education, Culture, Science and Technology examining the formation of values in the new generations.

10 It is worth citing here the high profile Marxist scholar in Cuba, Fernando Martinez Heredia (1995a), who observed that “Cuba submitted ideologically to the USSR, and anything that differed from this line was considered as being anti-Soviet and ideological diversionism … Within the currents of Marxism it was affirmed that only the Soviet current was correct” (p. 21)

11 The coding system used to identify individual responses (e.g. Lawyer, S1.23) indicates the preferred occupation expressed by the student, the school involved in the survey (S1, S2 or S3), followed by an allocated number for each anonymous student (survey) received from each school.
(usually professional) career, employment, and socio-economic status and security for them and their future family.

The strong desire “to be somebody”, and not be “left behind” in life is reflected in students’ expressed occupational choices. The Year 9 students’ overwhelmingly aspired to high-status professional careers. Using ISCO-88 categories, 59% of responses fell in the Group 2 “Professional” category, these selections frequently including professions in the areas of law, medicine, psychology, pharmacy, accounting and economics, and architecture. A further 14.3% selected occupations in the Group 3 “Technicians and associate professionals” category, including arts, professional sports, nursing, optometry, and gastronomy.12 In contrast, only 7.6% of responses fell within the Group 7 category of “Craft and related trades workers” covering traditional working-class occupations, the survey responses in this category including mechanics, carpenters and drivers.

The strength of the professional occupational preferences, expressed consistently across the sample, supports the proposition that the expressed desire “to be somebody” was largely tied to one’s future occupation and career path. The concept of “being somebody” also appeared consistently in students’ survey responses, reported below, to three separate questions:
- Question 4: Briefly describe why you want to find the job indicated in question 3;
- Question 9: Generally, do you think that people deserve the standard of living that they have? Why / Why Not?; and
- Question 12: What are your three main fears for the future after you finish school?

Direct expressions of the desire “to be somebody” by students can be seen in their rationale for their expressed career choice:13

… my decision to pursue my career has nothing to do with the Special Period, I chose it because I like it and I want to be somebody in life (Accountant; S1.15)
To have a good future, a good salary, and to be somebody in life (Economist, 2.05)
Because I like it [International Trade] and in my country I would be able to be somebody and, perhaps, I would be able to help the country doing business with other countries (International Trade Negotiator, S1.57)

Because I want to be somebody in life and not be left in the street (Industrial Electrician, 2.06)

We can see in these responses the combination of professional career choices, contributing to future social and economic well being, in turn contributing to achieving some sort of social distinction in life. Not surprisingly, students directly expressed economic motivations for occupational choices, tied to concerns about gaining secure employment and the capacity to maintain a house and family in the future. Interestingly however, such concerns were frequently linked to the idea that, if unsuccessful in their chosen career path, they would not “be somebody” in the future. This is reflected in the following fears about the future expressed by students:

To not realise my career after so much work, to be a nobody (Professional Sportsperson, S1.20)
To maintain and help my family, to study for a career and to be somebody in life (Businessman, S1.28)
What I will be in the future, whether I am able to achieve my dreams (International Trade, S1.57)
To not achieve my [chosen] career, and to be unemployed in the future (Auto mechanic, S2.33)
To find work, to find a good job (Director of Import Company, S3.15)

Revolutionary Schooling in the Post-Soviet, Capitalist World-System

The concept of national systems of mass school education contributing to the development of human capital, as part of a broader program of national economic development, is not new. Nor is the associated notion of individuals achieving social status and recognition through professional education and training in a recognised career. What makes these results interesting is the context of Cuba 1994, seeking to define a progressive, socialist way out of the national crisis provoked by the fall of real existing socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. As acknowledged within Cuba at the time, the strength of such concepts and an apparent crisis of youth values stand alongside long-standing formal objectives of the radical political formation of students via school education.

The critique of schooling highlighted aspects of the school system in place, including the focus on preparing students to become disciplined workers with a ‘scientific understanding of the world’, that were shared with schools in capitalist societies. This extended to a critique of real existing socialism, in which the development of an authentic socialist ethic of solidarity was replaced by an ethic of individual social mobility, and the achievement of improved socio-economic status, within the socialist hierarchy.

13 Similar findings from youth surveys in the 1980s are reported by Domínguez (1999), in which students expressed strong preferences for a successful professional career in order to “be somebody” (p. 7).
A world-system perspective sets such a critique in terms of a shared, geocultural understanding of both capitalist and ‘real-existing socialist’ countries within a single capitalist world-system, that included a shared belief in progress, the scientific and technological revolutions and their capacity to deliver ongoing economic growth and increased consumption, and in the pursuit of programs for national economic development (Wallerstein 1995a, 1995b, 1994, 1992a, 1992b). In a similar way Blanco (1995a) outlines shared aspects of what he describes as the two dominant cultures of modernism: capitalism and real existing socialism. The designated role for schooling in either case holds much in common: the preparation of ‘good citizens’ and ‘good workers’, ready to take their place in the workforce and society and contribute to the program of national economic development.14

According to Blanco (1995a; 1995b) Cuba’s emulation of the Soviet model of socialism generally, and school education in particular, worked in practice to promote individual expectations of mobility, in order to “be somebody” important in the social structure, via education the attainment of educational credentials leading to a professional and acknowledged career path. While officially articulated in terms of developing in students a ‘love of work’ or a ‘communist attitude towards work’, the practice aligned with an instrumental role for schooling to prepare disciplined workers, at the expense of developing a more radical, revolutionary ethic of solidarity.

In the midst of this debate in Cuba, there was a continued official call for schools to promote the formation of socialist values, and to prepare people for work to assist the project of national economic development (see for example Varela Hernández et al. 1995). Indeed, MINED’s (1995b) prescribed guiding principles for the 1994-95 school year reaffirmed the principles and specific strategies for students’ “labour formation” as a part of the mainstream curriculum and subject programs. It was in this context that Mari Lois (1995a) called for:

… a revision of the process and content of our education so that, in the future, it defines the ethic of solidarity as an essential outcome, but not the only one, of the educational system and the society together (p.11). Education for life has to prepare students not to be disciplined workers, nor to be political activists, but fundamentally I would argue that the two main components of preparing students for life are to prepare them to make decisions in accordance with the interests of humanity, and with an ethic of solidarity (Mari Lois 1995b).

Conclusion

The significant educational achievements of revolutionary Cuba are well known and documented. In particular the literacy campaign of 1961, coupled with the massive expansion of free, secular, public, primary schooling, followed by secondary and tertiary education for the entire population, are frequently reported in work on Cuban Education (see for example MINED 1995a; Varela Hernández et al. 1995; Valdés Paz 2001; MacDonald 1985).

The economic crisis and restructuring of the Special Period in the 1990s, following the social upheaval of August 1994, saw a partial opening for more critical intellectual debate about the crisis confronting the island and alternative strategies for socialist Cuba in the post-Soviet world. In this climate a more rigorous critique emerged of the Soviet inspired model of school education institutionalised in Cuba under the banner of forming new socialist citizens. By inference, and at times directly, this involved a critique of the then current structures and practice of school education, particularly in reference to its role in the socialisation of the youth.

The data from the survey of Year 9 students in Cuba in 1995 provides some quantitative and qualitative support for the argument that the focus on preparing students for work, and in turn for the national development project, was being thoroughly assimilated by students in terms of their individual social and economic advancement in society. The strength of students’ preference for high-status professional occupations for example, in the context of the economic crisis of the Special Period and official mobilisations of the population to work in agriculture in order to feed the country, suggests that such expectations were well entrenched. Cuban youth were clearly learning ‘to be somebody’ in life, in part through their acquisition of educational credentials, in ways similar to systems and societies throughout the world-system.

Further investigation and elaboration of these findings is needed in order to more fully assess the strength of the identified themes, and how they relate to a world-system account of the Cuban Revolution and Cuba’s revolutionary schools. Such research and debate, in the spirit of developing a progressive critique of schooling and strengthening efforts to promote ethic of solidarity, may contribute to debate on Cuba’s radical educational agenda, and in turn to the articulation of progressive alternatives to the capitalist world-system.

14 These arguments connect with the literature arguing that a set of world cultural beliefs, in part spread through nations’ participation in NGOs and the inter-state system, can account for the spread of similar systems of mass school education across the world (e.g. Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985; Boli and Ramirez 1986; Meyer and Hannan 1979; Ramirez and Boli 1987; Ramirez and Rubinson 1979).
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About the Author

Dr Tom Griffiths is currently working as a Lecturer in the areas of Pedagogy and Sociology of Education, at the University of Newcastle; and is a Chief Investigator on the 4 year ARC Linkage Grant funded Longitudinal Study, *Systemic implications of pedagogy and achievement in NSW Public Schools*. Tom’s research interests extend to: the historical expansion of secondary schooling in Cuba; the expansion of mass education in the world-system; world-system analysis; the development of more equitable and just alternatives to the capitalist world-system, and the potential role of school education within this project.

Appendix

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The primary objective of secondary schooling should be:</th>
<th>Valid% (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give you the knowledge and skills that are necessary for work</td>
<td>42.9% (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare you to continue the construction of socialism in Cuba</td>
<td>23.8% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare you to contribute to national economic development</td>
<td>12.4% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide who will be workers, doctors, engineers etc…</td>
<td>8.6% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you how to study independently and participate effectively in society</td>
<td>7.6% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you socialist values and attitudes like solidarity, collective work, etc</td>
<td>4.8% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>