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A View into Literacy in Cuba's Early Grades

Naomi Mulvihill

Introduction

This February a group of educators from the Boston area went to Cuba on a trip sponsored by Lesley University and lead by professor, Pablo Navarro-Rivera. Five of us were bilingual Kindergarten and first grade teachers from local public schools.(1) Collectively, we had spent a significant amount of time in classrooms in Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Many of us had on-going relationships with teachers in these countries. In the context of Latin America and beyond, we knew Cuba stood out as a nation that had established equity in access to education and had succeeded in eradicating illiteracy. We had no sense, however, of the particulars of the Cuban approach to literacy teaching in the early grades. We were eager to observe in classrooms to see for ourselves how education is enacted in Cuba and to share experiences with teachers there. During our ten-day tour, we visited three urban schools—the Angela Landa Elementary School, the Simón Rodríguez Elementary School and the Abel Santamaría School for the Blind. Keen to improve our own practice, we had many questions, but mainly we wanted to do what teachers love to do: sit next to a child and watch him or her sound out a word, witness a young learner make sense of an idea, be present at the moment a thought is first articulated, and consider another teacher's way of engaging students with subject matter.

The focus of this paper—literacy learning in *pre-escolar* (the Cuban equivalent to Kindergarten) and first grade—is narrow in the panorama of Cuban educational programs. As a result of a longstanding collaboration between Lesley University and the Cuban schools, we were given open access to classrooms and teachers who spoke without inhibitions about their struggles and successes. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that our observations and conversations occurred over the course of days rather than months. A lengthier experience would surely have yielded a more complex and nuanced portrait. Likewise, our contact with schools was limited to urban schools in the historic district of Old Havana in addition to the Abel Santamaría, located in the Havana section of Marianao. Undoubtedly, a tour of rural schools or even of schools outside the historic district in the Capital would have raised other issues. Variations in materials, methods, scheduling and principles are minimal in the Cuban system. The Ministry of Education dictates and regulates these crucial aspects of education. Thus, though the environment and installations might differ, to a great extent, the phonics lesson we saw in a first grade in the Angela Landa Elementary would very closely resemble what we might see in a tiny primary school in the remote

Sierra Maestra region. The Cuadernos Martianos text, a collection of José Martí's stories and poems, used in pre-escolar in the Capital would also be used in Nuevitas.

The Culture of Education

Officially, all working mothers in Cuba are guaranteed a seat for children between one and five years old in a system of daycare centers called "*Circuitos Infantiles*." Infants and toddlers whose mothers stay at home with children are ineligible for daycare. Primary school begins with pre-escolar, a transitional year between daycare and formal academics in first grade. In addition to the Circuitos Infantiles that function to socialize Cuba's youngest students to the norms and routines of school, several factors ease the transition for children entering school. First, the overwhelming majority of the population is linguistically homogeneous and literate, so teachers can expect all young learners to speak Spanish and virtually all to come from homes where parents read and write proficiently. Because education is promoted as a revolutionary value and universal access to education is a concrete reality in Cuba, parents believe in the system and teachers operate in a climate of respect. A continuity of culture and shared expectations exists between school and home. Though structures for communication (conferences, home visits, and report cards) are maintained, schools do not need to expend energy "bringing parents on board" or bridging a gap between home and school. In the climate of scarcity that has prevailed since the economic hardship following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the intensification of the U.S. embargo, deemed the "Special Period," schools have come to depend on citizens for vital voluntary support. Through mass organizations that operate on a community level, families help "clean, renovate, and sometimes build new school buildings."⁽²⁾ This bedrock level of involvement fosters parents' familiarity with and comfort in schools and, in turn, facilitates their children's sense of themselves as active participants in their own schooling.

As proof of the Revolution's efficacy and, simultaneously, as a revolutionary ideal. Cuba's system of education enjoys a venerable status. An impressive 9.8% of the GNP or 16.6% of all government spending goes to fund education⁽³⁾, and of that, roughly 35%⁽⁴⁾ is allocated for non-salary items including books and instructional materials. To offer some context for those statistics, Cuba's southern neighbors, the Dominican Republic and Haiti allocate respectively 1.7% and 1.4% of the GNP (9.7% and of Dominican and 20% of Haitian total government expenditures) to education. Northern industrialized neighbors, the United States and Canada, invest 5.6% and 5.2% of their GNPs (14.4% and 12.5% of their overall government spending) respectively.⁽⁵⁾

Cuban institutions—libraries, museums, cultural organizations promoting the arts—view collaboration with schools as fundamental. When a number of schools in Old

Havana were slated for renovation as part of the district's designation as a world heritage site, the system was faced with finding temporary lodgings for hundreds of students. Rather than overcrowd other nearby schools or create provisional accommodations in ill-suited buildings, the schools were de-centralized and classrooms were established in museums. The institutions cooperated not only by making space available, but by offering enrichment and encouraging teachers to make use of the collections on hand. Ultimately, the population of displaced students performed better than their peers. As a result, a permanent system of *aulas museo* or museum classrooms was put in place. If isolation and economic calamity have taught Cuba anything, it's an ingenious ability to respond to shifting fortunes and circumstances.

Cuban children spend a substantial amount of time in school. Primary students begin their days with assembly at 7:30 a.m. and are dismissed at 4:00 in the afternoon. Of these hours, thirty minutes are spent on a morning break and ninety are allotted for lunch and recess in the afternoon. Children whose mothers work receive free lunch at school, while the children of those who don't go home for lunch. In addition to a lengthy school day, the academic year lasts up to 220 days⁽⁶⁾—far exceeding the international mean for intended instructional time among countries in UNESCO's 2007 report on World Education Indicators.⁽⁷⁾

The Learning Environment

The physical space of the two elementary schools we visited was similar. Each was clean and spare. Portraits of the heroes of the Revolution—Che and Fidel and the socialist state's recent advocate, Hugo Chavez—hung on the walls. In each case the principal greeted us warmly and invited us in. All classrooms were equipped with blackboards, desks, televisions on carts, a teacher desk and usually a small shelf for materials. Few visuals and little or no student work were displayed in the halls and classrooms. Most rooms had a single, teacher-made chart—an alphabet chart in syllables in all first grades, a chart of the alphabet in cursive in third and fourth grade, and so on—though there were more instructional materials exhibited in the rooms that housed pre-escolar students. Depending on the space, children sat in rows of desks facing forward or in desks pushed together into in a horseshoe. Schools were quiet and orderly. There were no intercoms, no announcements, and no interruptions. Though children moved around the buildings freely, they did so without running or raising their voices. Every child was dressed in a uniform. The overarching climate was friendly and affectionate. Teachers and principals greeted families with hugs and kisses. Parents chatted with school staff and knew their way around the small facilities. A sense of calm and accomplishment pervaded. One was left with the impression that parents strongly identified their children's primary school experiences with their own.

Educational policy, however, hasn't stood still in Cuba. Since 1959, the state has undertaken three periods of reform. The first, immediately following the Revolution, consisted of a massive literacy campaign and the rapid expansion of the system by means of building schools and training teachers. This phase lasted until around 1970. A second and third period, called "*perfeccionamiento*" and "*perfeccionamiento continuo*," were designed to ensure ongoing improvement of the system and lasted until the end of the 1990s. The aim was to develop pedagogical theory and technical and vocational training. During this phase, quotas for university study were radically reduced and many secondary students were channeled to technical and vocational schools to train for careers in the agricultural sector. The most recent initiative, beginning in 2000, has sought to introduce technology into schools, lower class size to 20 students in primary and 15 in secondary school and to tackle the problem of teacher attrition.

During our visit, we were immediately aware of consistently small class sizes, the television sets and computer labs, and some very young, tentative teachers. Currently the nation faces a critical shortage of teachers. Combined with the push to lower class size, the search for new opportunities to offset economic hardship has caused startling levels of teacher attrition. Many veteran instructors have left their posts to work in the burgeoning tourism industry where in a single week they can earn from tips what would have taken them a year to earn as teachers. A program to replace them with young 6 teachers, many still in their late teens, is evolving. Remaining veteran teachers we spoke with expressed concern that the provisional teachers hadn't had the benefit of the rigorous training they received. Before the phase of economic crisis of the "Special Period," teacher preparation began at the secondary level at a four-year pedagogical institution and was followed by five additional years of study. The program included academic work, observation and a practicum. Once hired, teachers received on-going professional development to hone their skills. The new program of teachers-in-training circumvents the prolonged period of university study to put young women and men in their final year of preparatory school in charge of classrooms with on-site supervision.

In the midst of all the warmth and community I've mentioned, another seemingly disparate element characterizes the learning environment. On many occasions we saw students preparing for competitions, were told about their efforts or saw them publicly honored for their successes. At one school, absent fourth graders were competing in a chess tournament. At the same site, students designed posters for an environmental awareness art contest. In another school, students and their parents were recognized at morning assembly for winning essays and exams in Science and History. On one hand, the contests clearly promoted national pride and rewarded scholarship. On the other, they may serve to reinforce a pervasive attitude that some students are academically gifted while others are better disposed to lesser pursuits.

Over and over again in classrooms and informal conversations, we heard statements that implied teachers' strong belief in inborn capacity. When I was helping a child read a riddle in his workbook, his peer turned around and said, "*El no puede leer*" (He can't read) as if to let me know I shouldn't bother.

Cuba has two branches of education: general education which serves children with no diagnosed disabilities and special education for students who require services for developmental delays, hearing and visual impairment, autism, language disorders, affective disorders, physical disabilities, behavioral disorders, and the like. The Ministry of Education calculates that 51,338 children and young people with special needs attend 7 schools in 421 separate facilities.(8) Some of those facilities are designed to provide temporary intervention with the goal of integrating students into regular education at the end of treatment. During our stay, we toured a school for the visually impaired housed on the campus of Batista's former military barracks and were struck by the extent of services available and the staff's dedication. Beyond motives of efficiency, economic viability and the ability to centralize services for children and families, a policy that places special needs students in separate schools also narrows the range of needs and learning styles in general education classrooms. While it mitigates a teacher's difficult task of reaching students, it may contribute to the perception that difference implies inferiority.

Instruction

Our close observation of instruction took place in three classrooms where teachers were particularly open to our presence. They invited us to sit among the students, permitted us to take notes and photographs and answered our questions during recess, lunch and in several meetings after school. Two were *pre-escolar* classrooms, taught by veteran teachers and one was a first grade, lead by a teacher-in-training who had been in the early cadre of intensively trained young teachers. She was in her sixth year on the job. In Cuba, *pre-escolar* serves as an intermediate stage between the *Círculo Infantil* and the more rigid academic regimen of succeeding grades. In the *pre-escolar* classrooms, we saw many teacher-made materials—a blank calendar for calendar activities, large figures for story telling, construction paper shapes, decorated cardboard boxes holding linking blocks and wooden blocks, a stove, sink and refrigerator carefully crafted from cardboard boxes, a first aid kit for hospital play that included an oxygen mask and tank made out of liter plastic bottles and lengths of surgical tubing, a cardboard basketball hoop, a box reconfigured as a vanity in a beauty salon—in short, what we would refer to as “centers,” all deftly cobbled together from whatever was available. On one wall was a pocket chart full of combs — one for each child. Next to it hung twenty toothbrushes. On another wall, twenty hooks held twenty little facecloths. In this slightly cluttered space with its sagging boxes and brightly colored materials, one simultaneously felt the artistry of the

teacher and the presence of young children. By contrast, the first grade classroom consisted of rows of desks, a blackboard, an image of Che and a poster of Fidel, a modest shelf on which a few paper materials were kept, and the teacher's desk. Here, a sort of generic order prevailed.

What *pre-escolar* teachers called "role play," the equivalent of our "choice time" launched the day. Students moved around the room, unpacking dress-ups, a miniature plastic espresso maker and cups for playing house. In one corner children enacted their version of school in which a boy directed five other students in making an illustration of Che's cap. A group of girls used plasticine to make press-on nails, bracelets and scenes of houses, people and trees. Others enacted a birth in the hospital area using a doll for the baby and plastic pliers as forceps. During this open-ended play, students were busy and animated. They utilized materials to their own ends and spoke continuously to one another. Arguments arose and were resolved or brought to the attention of the teacher. They talked to us often to explain what they were doing or to answer our queries. Their oral language was impressive. They delivered their ideas in full sentences. The teacher sat nearby, but mostly kept quiet. Children sought her out as they needed her. As students lost interest in one thing, they'd drift to another center. This went on at full tilt for three quarters of an hour.

Following "role play," we observed language arts lesson across the hall in the other preschool. Children turned to face the teacher, listened, and raised their hands to respond to her questions. First, she had them name the nation's heroes. Children remembered the heroes by their first names—Che, Fidel, Raúl—and seemed to keep them in their consciousness like extended family members. Their teacher then asked, "*Y quienes son los enemigos de Cuba?*" (Who are Cuba's enemies?) A boy raised his hand and said, "*El gobierno de los estados unidos, no el pueblo de los estados unidos.*" (The US government, not the people of the United States.) Among the objectives for civic education in the primary grades is that students learn "[t]o express feelings of love for the country, the Revolution and its symbols as well as admiration and respect for the country's heroes and martyrs..." as well as "[t]o show feelings of repudiation towards all those who in any way offend their country." (9)

When she shifted the focus to a retelling of "*El camarón encantado*" a José Martí story much like the tale of the fisherman and his wife, the teacher emphasized the implicit moral—that greed leads to an insatiable thirst for material wealth but can't bring happiness. Two or three children participated in the telling, adding details and elaborating. Some students' attention became diffuse, but mostly they sat and listened, as we did, content with the expert narration. The lesson ended with a choral recitation of Martí's lengthy poem, *Los Zapaticos de Rosa*. The poem, which covers six and a half pages, employs complex vocabulary—*laurel, clavel, barranca, procesión, caprichosa, salobres, inglesa, francesa*—embedded in a fairly simple narrative in verse.

But it is long! The teacher offered an occasional prompt, but left the class to recite on its own. Of the twenty children, two or three knew nearly every word and perhaps half of the class knew most. Six or seven students mouthed or mumbled verses throughout, doing their best to look unobtrusive.

The *pre-escolar* curriculum stresses oral language and avoids written text. Classrooms had no alphabet chart or cards, no “word walls” or name charts and no labels for passive acquisition of vocabulary or to use as a resource in writing. Text isn’t used in *pre-escolar* to help Cuba’s youngest learners understand basic reading and writing concepts such as directionality, tracking, letter-sound correspondence, high frequency words, common spelling patterns and language conventions. Though many children had memorized “*Los zapaticos de Rosa*,” they had never seen the poem in written form. When we inquired about the lack of text in the rooms, one teacher told us children would find it distracting. Later they explained that in *pre-escolar* students do not learn the alphabet in its entirety. They learn the vowels and four dominant consonants—m, n, l, and s. No one could tell us precisely why children are not exposed to written language in their first year of primary school. Perhaps there is a belief that the introduction of text might hurry children and disrupt the informal atmosphere of *pre-escolar*. Maybe an expansion of pre-reading and writing in *pre-escolar* would call for modifications of the first grade curriculum. At any rate, the sole emphasis on oral language gave us pause and raised questions about our assumptions about literacy. The flip side for us was: why don’t we have students memorize lengthy texts? After all, through repetition, José Martí’s exquisite language became their own. Does our use of print material and impulse to support children’s writing diminish their opportunities through exposure to text at the same time we create more occasions for oral language development in our curricula?

First graders had their notebooks open and were working on the letter of the day when we came in. They busied themselves copying sentences the teacher had written on the blackboard. The teacher then reviewed the letter, *doble ele*, in upper and lower case form. She elicited examples from students of words that began with or contained *doble ele*. One child offered “*pollo*,” another “*silla*,” someone else suggested “*llave*.” This went on for a minute or so, with the teacher affirming or correcting students as they went. Several students proffered words like *yegua* or *yema* which sounded right but happened to be spelled with *igriegar* rather than *doble ele*. Rather than affirm these ideas and explain that while the two letters are similarly pronounced, they look different in print, she told them they were wrong and moved on. None of this was done with the least bit of malice. On the contrary, most children waved their hands in the air, avid to participate. Next, the teacher asked children to repeat words and break them down by syllables, clapping out the pattern according to sound. With each new word, the instructor asked, “Is it a long or a short word?” How many syllables does it have?” Then she’d select a student to go to the

blackboard and draw a blank space for each syllable and beneath that, a dot for each sound or letter. For example, pollito looked like this:

_____ ** *** **

The blanks were not filled in on the board. Instead children composed the words in small pocket charts at their desks. Many children struggled, unsure of their letters and sounds. The teacher circulated, replacing their incorrect attempts with the proper letters. She did not refer to the alphabet chart she had displayed next to the board and prompt them with cues, such as, “Pollito, begins with the sound p-p-p like papá...” so that they could become self-reliant and perform the critical cognitive work of evoking or finding the letter shape that corresponded with the sound. The language block continued along these lines of listening, taking a stab at an answer, deferring to the teacher, and copying into a journal or workbook for the next 35 minutes. Children decoded isolated words and a short text and concluded with a cursive exercise. Language was conveyed in discrete parts and decontextualized skills. A handful of children failed to complete one exercise before they were expected to go on to another. Five or six students were at a total loss as to what was going on. Others were hardly challenged.

When we asked how they supported struggling students, teachers told us that they created differentiated lessons —up to three different versions of a single lesson— in order to reach a range of learners. However, we never observed variations in materials, small group work that targeted specific skills or teachers employing specific strategies to cater to different learning styles. Though we have seen it elsewhere in Latin America, the custom of teaching cursive at the same time children are acquiring their capital and lower case letters in print is puzzling, particularly in the case of students who struggle academically. It adds approximately twenty-three ciphers that young learners need to make sense of and assimilate. Though the introduction of new letters is slow and methodical—one new letter every three days—it occurs outside of any overarching program of language as a means of communication, a vehicle for meaning and a system of symbols we can master and manipulate to our own creative ends. We could detect little continuity between pre-escolar’s oral language curriculum and first grade’s program of explicit tuition in apportioned skills.

Conclusion

Many of the questions stimulated by our school visits are the same ones that we encounter in our own practice: How can we best teach skills in context? How do we structure subject matter so that a wide range of learners can participate at their developmental levels? How do we strike a balance between rich oral language and the written word? What opportunities can we create for students to use writing as art? as

transaction? as entertainment? as homage? as self-reflection? as an agent of change? What visuals support language learning best in the early grades? How can we ensure that students are challenged? How can we develop critical thought through the language curriculum? What strategies do we have for putting children in charge of their own learning rather than learning to defer to their teachers?

Other questions centered on the unique Cuban context. If Cuban students are faring so much better than their Latin American peers,(10) is there room to promote higher order thinking in the program? Can play be re-envisioned as a means to academic learning? How can the child-centered elements of the pre-escolar environment and curriculum inform teaching in successive grades? How can print material be utilized for pre-reading and experimentation with writing in pre-escolar? Through ongoing involvement and communication with Cuban teachers, we hope to gain more insights about their motives, obstacles and confusions as well as their achievements and goals.

End Notes

(1) The bilingual teachers' group consisted of Jessie Auger, Martine Lebret, Katy Meyer, Nelly Roble and myself. Four of us work at the Rafael Hernandez School in Boston and one works at the Barbieri School in Framingham

(2) Dan Erikson, Annie Lord, Peter Wolf. Cuba's Social Services: A Review of Education, Health, and Sanitation, January 31, 2002, p. 10. Paper written as background for the *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People*. See website: <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/IW3P?IB/2004/03/01/00026551...>

(3) See UNESCO's Institute for Statistics Data Base:
http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=2867_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

(4) UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006: Literacy for Life*, (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005).

(5) Data for individual countries are cited from UNESCO Institute for Statistics website <http://www.uis.unesco.org/unesco/tableviewer/document.aspx?ReportId=143>

(6) *ibid*, p. 9.

(7) UNESCO, *Education Counts: Benchmarking Progress in 19 WEI Countries*, (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007), p. 123.

(9) Chelia Valera Acosta, *Education for Citizenship in the Caribbean: A Study on Curricular Policy and Teacher Training in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic*, (Santo Domingo: Amigo de Hogar, 2005), p. 29.

(10) “In 1998 UNESCO’s Latin American office produced the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education, the only region-wide achievement test ever administered in Latin American Countries. In this test, Cuba far outperformed the region in third and fourth grade math and language achievement. Even the lowest quartile of Cuban students performed above the regional average. Only the highest scoring students from other Latin American countries matched the achievement of students in the lowest two quartiles in Cuba—a difference typically found between rich and poor countries.” op cit. Erikson, Lord, et al., p. 11. Interestingly, the notes of the same document go on to explain that “[b]ecause the island’s performance was so dramatically above that of other countries, UNESCO even administered the text a second time to check results.