

Towards Pedagogy of Tenderness: Reflections on Cuban Education

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Abstract

This reflective essay shares the experiences of U.S. educators through a research trip to explore educational practices in Cuba. The authors observed four components of the Cuban educational system and reflect through example and research the progression of the Cuban educational system from a “caring state” to a Pedagogy of Tenderness. As observed by the authors, the Cuban educational system offers pedagogy and practice that lends itself to U.S. aspirations to create meaningful and effective school, family, and community partnerships. Education in Cuba is seen as the responsibility of all of society and is defined through the partnering of school, family, and community.

Keywords: pedagogy, education, Cuba

Introduction

The twenty-three 9th grade students looked both nervous and curious as a small group of United States educators entered their classroom in a province just northwest of Havana City, Cuba. They had been told we were there to observe how the Cuban educational system functioned, and could freely answer the questions we put to them. As questions about academic achievement, curriculum, methodology, and student belongingness ensued, we saw clearly the profound and meaningful relationship among school, family, and community solidarity. Students spoke with conviction about their potential for future career satisfaction *and* contribution to the common good. Each, in turn, spoke directly and specifically about the steps required to attain career goals, personal satisfaction, and involvement in the solidarity of the state. It also became clear that the pedagogy driving the curricula, family connectedness, and community support is one of integral development: a pedagogy concerning itself with the whole student.

This reflective essay shares the experiences of U.S. educators from a research trip to explore educational practices in Cuba. The opportunity to visit schools and universities, meet with students, teachers, parents, principals, and community leaders enabled us to reflect upon four components of the Cuban educational system that contribute to increased student learning, positive classroom environments, and community involvement despite extreme economic deficiencies. The components are: Towards a Pedagogy of Tenderness; Consensus Building and the Transmission of Values; A Culturally Responsive Philosophy and Practice; and The Value of School, Family, and Community in Integral Development, and each will be discussed in turn.

Towards a Pedagogy of Tenderness

As our group visited primary and secondary schools, pedagogical institutes, and universities we gained insight into the overarching educational frame resulting in Cuba being described as a “caring state” moving toward a pedagogy of tenderness.

The term “caring state” was adopted following the 1959 revolution as a result of the commitment from the Cuban state to social justice - to be responsible for each individual’s physical, spiritual, and intellectual development and well-being. This pedagogy of integral development is pedagogy of the whole student – cognitive, behavioral, affective, social, and political with a strong national identity that is based in community – being in the community, being a part of the community, contributing to the community. The caring state supports this education for everyone. Cuba’s commitment to education began with the Literacy Campaign launched in 1961 as the First Revolution in education. Schools were closed so teachers, students, and others could travel outside the cities to teach reading and writing to citizens of all ages. The expansion of secondary education with its unique integration of work and study initiated the Second Revolution. The success of these two revolutions in Cuban education is evident in the results from UNESCO studies demonstrating Cuban students learn twice as much as their peers from 12 countries, and 97% of Cuban students reporting a positive classroom environment - an environment open to dialogue and active participation (UNESCO, 1998, 2002). The current, Third Revolution builds on the past success with Action Research, conducted at all levels of the educational system, continually informing theory and practice.

In Cuba, education is defined by the constitution as the responsibility of all of society and schools have been defined as the core cultural institution of Cuban communities. Partnering with families and communities is assumed in the making and implementation of policies. Each school has a council that includes parents, student organizations, and other community stakeholders, and is instrumental in linking the home, school, and community. The Federation of Cuban Women of mothers who actively participate in schools throughout the island is instrumental in linking home, school, and community. Parental involvement in a child’s education is seen as critical to a child’s success in Cuba and is an unspoken norm. Other teachers we talked to described similar philosophical perspectives of family and community involvement. The principal of a secondary school we visited (Grades 6-8) based her school philosophy on her master’s research that concluded there are no problem children - the problem is at home, in the community, or with the teacher. In a math class of 40 seventh grade students with two teachers, individual parent/teacher conferences are held once a month, and more often if needed.

Perhaps the Pedagogy of Tenderness is best captured by Kleinfeld’s (1975) “warm demander” where the educator has clear and demanding academic expectations, while also developing positive interpersonal relationships with students. This approach seeks to develop classroom climates of emotional warmth; consistent and high expectations for quality academic performance; time spent to establish positive personal relationships with and among students; extending caring relationships for students beyond the classroom; and communicating with non-verbal cues, including the kinesthetic feeling of closeness. Ware (2006) contends this creates an environment of active learning with high expectations, relationship building, and a sense of warmth and caring.

The Third Revolution continues to develop goals to promote values education and character formation; refurbish school buildings and equip classrooms with TV sets and computers; improve teacher quality through technical training; facilitate links between education and employment; increase student learning four-fold; enhance post graduate education; and improve the quality and inclusiveness of education (Lutjens, 2007). In *Pedagogy of Tenderness*, Turner Martí and Pita Céspedes (2001) demonstrate that affective development is as important as cognitive development for children’s success in education. Additionally, Lutjens (2007) characterizes Turner Martí’s views on a pedagogy of tenderness as including attention paid to students’ creativity, their learning, and the integration of knowledge with feelings and behaviors of caring. As a result, Turner Martí and Pita Céspedes (2001) describe the success of the Third Revolution as a shift that turns full attention to the student. This shift embodies the move from a caring state to a Pedagogy of Tenderness.

Consensus Building and the Transmission of Values

Think back to your days in elementary school. Who were the national heroes whose pictures donned the classroom walls? Whose names were evoked when discussing the beliefs and behaviors that embody the core values of your communities? José Martí, a Cuban national hero whose writings are studied by every student in Cuba, wrote about freedom and education with passion and conviction. Ernesto “Che” Guevara, a Cuban national hero also studied by every student, introduced collectivism as an important part of the individual personality. Turner Martí (2007) explains, “In fostering collectivism, Che delved into the importance of critical analysis among the members of a group, and into the advocacy of our own opinions and the line of arguments required to attain a united action” (p.26). This united action was evident in the schools we visited through the photographs of Martí and Che on the walls and the presentations from students reciting the words and poems of both Che Guevara and Jose Martí, and singing songs in their honor. It is this collective will symbolized by the one party system in control in Cuba that defines the curriculum.

The Jose Martí Pioneers Organization for primary students (Grades 1-8) and the Federation of Secondary Students (Grades 9-12) provides opportunities for students to individually identify areas of interest within the school, home, and community in which to pursue study and action (see photo of a list of 50 Pioneer activities). The appreciative combination of work and study, often referred to in the United States as service learning, is a fundamental principle of Cuban pedagogy. Responsibility to self, respect for others, and commitment to a just society motivate the “Pioneers”. They practice a form of democracy through class elections, school and community projects, and representation at local, state, and national conferences.

The examples underscore Dewey’s statement (as cited in Peterson & Skiba, 2001), “A successful school, like a successful business is a cohesive community of shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies” (p. 1). Contrast this with the U.S. system’s lack of consensus about the core values and beliefs that could bind us together generationally (Knapp & Woolverton, 2004). Yesterday’s educational models and today’s students struggle to appreciate one another, in part, because the older generation does not know how to pass forward its knowledge and experience in terms the younger generation can value (Brown, 2008). Instead, a value-free education has been purported as necessary to ensure fairness given the diversity within and between our communities. However, even in our “value-free” system, a core belief that seems to remain unvarying is that of self-determination. Each citizen of this country has the right to determine his or her path in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, as long as the pursuit does not infringe on that of another. Still this diversity of desire, and the great cavern of choice it creates may cause some futility in building consensus. The focus on individual accomplishment does not lend itself to building a community.

Martí (as cited in Carey, 2004) epitomizes the revolutionary ideal by writing: “The happiest people are the ones whose children are well-educated and instructed in philosophy; whose sentiments are directed into noble channels” (p. 45). The accomplishment of educating the individual adds value to the whole (the community) by the consensus of identified values and beliefs. As Lutjens (2007) explains: “Education is considered to be a responsibility of everyone [*tarea de todos*], while the state guarantees conditions for equality in education through centralization of policy making and welfare functions” (p. 165); the “study of education is thus as much about what we are allowed to learn and how” (p. 166). For Cubans, the shared vision of service to the ideal guides the collaborative efforts of families and schools on behalf of their children. The children grow up knowing they are valued, have a role in their society, and what is required to fulfill that role.

A Culturally Responsive Philosophy and Practice

According to the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems [NCCRESt] (n. d.), cultural responsiveness is the ability to learn from and relate respectively with people of one’s own culture as well as those from other cultures. Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors. Pedagogy and practice facilitate and support the achievement of all students, yet in “culturally responsive classrooms and schools, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally-supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement” (NCCRESt, n. d., para. 2). Unfortunately, United States educational systems do not yet consistently provide such contexts for all students.

A school community engaged in working together to create healthy environments that support the growth and development of children and adolescents is a common goal among all school leaders. Accordingly, parents, teachers, friends, and neighbors all have a role to play in positive youth development. One display of culturally responsive community building was observed upon arrival at a school for children with learning challenges. A group of children greeted us with smiles and a performance of song and dialogue whose primary characters were Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. The performance was an example of how theater and song are used as a curriculum vehicle for integration to the arts for children living with disabilities. The children learned topics, and in this case about the heroes of Cuba through active engagement. This collective of special education pedagogical curriculum called the Houses of Culture (Casas de Cultura) is replicated throughout Cuba in each province. The special education population at this school appeared not only passionate and confident about what they knew about their national heroes, but also appeared aware of their responsibility as students/citizens of the school community by mastery of performance.

A culturally responsive pedagogy “validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers” (Gay, 2000, p. 44), while simultaneously developing cultural identity, individual potential, and academic achievement. Developing multiple perspectives and learning to think inclusively and expansively while engaged in scholarly activities epitomizes academic success (Gay, 2006). Moving that endeavor beyond the classroom engages the family and community in that development as well.

The Value of School, Family, and Community in Integral Development

Building family, school, and community partnerships requires preparation on the part of educational leaders, teachers, counselors, and other support staff. Such preparation must identify what the core values and beliefs about learning, the philosophy by which it will be accomplished, and the explicit nature of the partnering. Research to date confirms that families from all cultural groups are interested in the education of their children, and desire more communication and involvement with schools (Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004). Through a pedagogy of tenderness, the power of caring, and in the style of a “warm demander”, culturally responsive partnerships can be designed to meet the educational and biological-psychological-social developmental needs of students. We all aspire to develop healthy, capable, caring, and contributing young people to inherit the earth. This means we must reconnect with them in terms of common ground and common goals. According to Brown (2008), “Significant learning will not take place without a significant relationship” (p. 10). While in Cuba, we witnessed the impact significant relationships have on students. Despite the lack of material wealth, Cuban schools have programs in language, music, art, and drama.

These subjects are deemed important to the integral development of the student and community, and are not negotiable. Fernández Fernández (2004) described a pedagogy of tenderness as having the two following central components: (a) “educating and teaching with affection and sensitivity” and (b) concentrating “on the construction and reconstruction of self-esteem as the first step toward consciousness-raising and transformational action” (p. 14). He describes pedagogy of tenderness as an attitude of “understanding” and caring as an integral, and inseparable, component to teaching and learning. A discussion of the model of overlapping spheres of influence by Hidalgo, Siu, and Epstein (2004) delineates the growing evidence of the effectiveness of school-family-community partnerships, which hold the child at the center. The model recognizes the interconnectedness of institutions that motivate, socialize, and educate youth. Such a model, where the students’ educational and emotional needs exist at the center of the interaction between school, family and community, is what we witnessed in the Cuban system. A pedagogy, which recognizes the value of placing the student at the center of the educational endeavor, also recognizes the value of incorporating family and community resources as partners. By offering many activities to meet the diverse learning goals of students (Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004), schools and their leaders can realize the connections so long desired, and offer students experiences in building both individual *and* community identities.

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