

State-led education for democratic socialism: Venezuela's Education Missions

Maura Duffy

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Abstract

Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Revolution' is conceptualised as an anti-neoliberal project that aims to promote fundamental changes in the configuration of political power via processes of state-grassroots collaboration. Central to this process is an emphasis on the key role of education in the development of a 21st Century socialism based on principles of protagonist participation and democratic socialism. While many education policies claim to encourage the participation of citizens and the idea of the 'democratic person', and have used the language of liberation, empowerment and justice, very few state-led initiatives have shown a clear commitment to creating spaces and opportunities whereby people can develop critical consciousness and become active agents in the restructuring of state-society relations. While many see developing critical literacy in a state-based education system as an oxymoron, the current process of state-promoted social change in Venezuela offers a rare opportunity to examine how state-sponsored education to promote protagonist, participatory democracy might develop in practice. This article therefore uses the Venezuelan case to examine the extent to which discourse has been put into practice, thereby shedding light on the possibility of state-grassroots collaboration to promote education for critical consciousness and structural change.

Key words: Education, State, Venezuela, Participation, Social Change

Bolivar said that a people can be dominated more, manipulated more, if they are ignorant. We lived for years in a state of ignorance and domination. For people to participate fully they need education. This is why the Missions were created. When the people have consciousness they can't be manipulated. Now the people are changing, they are awakening. Education is the main weapon in the struggle. (Tony: Mission Sucre student 2009)

Every education system has an underlying agenda, regardless of the type of regime, and therefore plays a political as well as educative role, either to reproduce existing relations and maintain hegemony, or promote social change. While many education policies have also encouraged the participation of citizens and the idea of the "democratic person", and have used the language of liberation, empowerment and justice, very few state-led initiatives have shown a clear commitment to building critical consciousness and creating spaces and opportunities whereby people can become active agents in the restructuring of state-society relations. However, while many see developing critical literacy in a state-based education system as an oxymoron (Luke 2000; Azevedo 1998), traditions of critical and popular

education are increasingly exploring the possibility of state-based education to promote critical thought and structural change. Current processes in Venezuela offer an opportunity to examine how this might develop in practice.

The Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela states that education is a fundamental right and that the state has a responsibility for its provision. At first, following the election of President Chávez in 1998 on an anti-neoliberal platform, the government pursued a social democratic course that emphasised state responsibility for social welfare combined with increased inclusion and participation. However, since 2005 government discourse radicalised beyond talk of alternatives to neoliberalism to frame the process in terms of a counter-hegemonic project through and for “Socialism for the 21st Century”. This “Bolivarian Revolution” is conceptualised as a pedagogical project to combine state transformation of political, social and economic relations with the creation of state-grassroots impelled, parallel education systems that promote protagonist participation. Both formal and non-formal education are viewed as key to this state-led project to create and consolidate a new hegemony grounded in direct and participatory democracy (5 Motors to Maximise the Revolution 2007; Simon Bolivar National Plan 2007).

This resonates with academic literature that socialism is the ultimate form of participatory democracy (e.g. Brookfield and Holst 2011) and is reminiscent of Gramsci's ideas of the central role of democracy rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat in building socialism. As Laclau (1977:174) stresses, the struggle for popular hegemony “is an effort to achieve the maximum possible fusion between democratic ideology and socialist ideology”. In this sense socialism cannot be restricted to political change or economic reform from above; it implies prefigurative practice and the self-emancipation of the people in economic, social and political spheres. The emphasis in Venezuela is on protagonist participation, parallelism, and the continued commitment to state provision of services, but within a new conceptualisation of the state as emanating from the will of the people. This situates the Venezuelan process, at least at the level of discourse, most closely within this framework of “Democratic Socialism through Popular Hegemony”, as defined by Slater (1986).

However, while many people speak of the participatory process underway in Venezuela and make reference in particular to the role of the Educational Missions in promoting protagonist participation (e.g. Motta and Cole 2014), there is very little empirical work into the form and content of these education programmes and if and how they stimulate popular power. Nor has there been extensive examination as to how such initiatives relate to the state and the degree of autonomy that they have. It is not enough to describe the policies and measures that have been put in place. A closer look at the objectives, means and outcomes of such education is needed to ascertain the extent to which education does create autonomous, critical thinkers and actors or whether people are encouraged to “mobilise without emancipation” (Molyneux 1985) in ways that serve the state rather than promoting participatory, protagonist democracy. My research addresses this deficit and contributes empirical research in Caracas between 2009 and 2014, with a particular focus on the Education Missions, to examine how these processes are developing in practice.

This article therefore gives a brief overview of Venezuelan education before examining how government discourse is put into practice in and through the government-introduced Education Missions. As Carr and Thesee (2009: 285) say, we need to look at how education “supports, cultivates and engages in/with democracy” and this involves examining the organisation of education about, for and as democracy. I therefore explore the extent to which involvement with the Missions increases people’s active and informed participation in wider organisational and decision-making processes. This involves particular reference to education for whom (access), how (organisation and implementation) and to what end (nature of participation and how education links to wider processes of democratic participation).

The background

Since winning the Presidential elections in 1998, education has been one of the government’s top priorities with the greatest increase in state resources from pre-school up to University level. Raby (2006) highlights how when the Chávez government assumed power in 1999 the education system as a whole was underfunded. Buildings and resources were inadequate and the system excluded large sectors of the population, including the middle classes, due to the cutbacks and privatisations of the 1980s and 1990s. General education spending went from just over 2% of GDP in 1996 to 4.3% in 2001 and to 5.8% in 2007. This figure rises to over 7% of GDP when the Education Missions are included (Griffiths and Williams 2009; Wilpert 2007; Raby 2006). Access to education at all levels and for all sectors of society has increased substantially (Weisbrot and Sandoval 2008) and Higher Education (HE) enrolment has increased among all socio-economic groups. This illustrates the general commitment of the government to the expansion of access to free public education at all levels and for society in general. Griffiths and Williams (2009) argue that this marked expansion of Free State education up to and including undergraduate University education is, in itself, quite radical in the current global neoliberal context.

Most importantly, non-formal and formal education is viewed as important in creating a new hegemony and as key to the state-led project of building a protagonist, participatory democracy by providing opportunities to practise democracy within educational programmes and by equipping people with the skills and knowledge needed to organise, mobilise and participate effectively in wider society. The Missions were established as a means to by-pass the bureaucracy of the “old” state which remained largely under the control of the opposition (Gott 2005). They were conceived of as far more than state-financed, compensatory welfare schemes. Rather they were seen as arenas for developing state-society collaboration in decision-making and the allocation of resources and for the exercise of self-governance in their planning and implementation. Sanchez (2007) explains that official discourse emphasises that the Missions are a means of giving power to the people so that they can become protagonists in their own development and in so doing become protagonists in the wider project of social change via democratic participation. From a Gramscian perspective these Missions, at least at the level of discourse, are crucial in the construction and consolidation of a new hegemony. They are a means of engaging in a war of position whereby people can take an active part in the formulation and delivery of social policy

through democratic, participatory processes that allow for the development of new counter-hegemonic ideologies and the practice of alternative modes of organisation.

Increased access to education

The Education Missions were introduced in 2003 following the radicalisation of the Chávez government after the failed coup and lock-out of 2002-2003, and in response to the 2003 census that revealed the extent of the educational deficit. The census found that 1.5 million people were illiterate, more than 2 million people had only reached primary level education and a further 2 million had been unable to complete secondary school education. Finally, a further ½ million secondary school graduates who qualified for University admission had been unable to, despite a desire to attend. This was largely due to the increase of hidden costs such as fees to register, take exams and graduate, quota systems and selective admissions procedures that favoured the upper middle and upper classes (Sanchez 2007; Raby 2006; Ellner 2003; Hellinger 2003). The percentage of working class students who applied to University and received a place dropped from 70% of applicants in 1984 to 19% in 1998 (Wilpert 2007). Following the census Chávez announced the introduction of the various Education Missions to address these shortcomings. The first of these was the Mission Robinson literacy campaign launched in July 2003. This was followed by high school equivalency education via Mission Ribas and Higher Education provision for previously excluded sectors via Mission Sucre later that year. Mission Cultura, a teacher training course, followed in 2005 and Mission Alma Mater, designed to extend access to mainstream University education, in 2007.

1.3 million people have become literate through Mission Robinson and Venezuela was declared “free” of illiteracy by UNESCO in 2005 (UNESCO 2006). By 2008 over 2 million people had graduated from Missions Robinson and Ribas and 571,917 students were studying in Mission Sucre, with 30,000 graduates so far. Enrolment in Higher Education in general has increased from 700,000 in 1998 to over 2 million in 2008 (MPPES 2009). According to UNESCO (2010) Venezuela has the world's 5th highest rate of University enrolment, with 83% of eligible citizens currently enrolled in higher education. This represents a 193% increase since 1999. The government has also extended the system of grants given to students to enable access. In 1998 50,986 grants were allocated. This had risen to 350,477 by 2008. Of these grants, in 2008, 15.3% went to the highest socioeconomic groups, 32.2% to the middle class and 52.2% to the working class and poor (MPPES 2009). The Social Missions have served to incorporate previously excluded sectors into the education system *and* redistribute resources to the poor and to society more generally.

Importantly, the municipalisation of education via the Missions has been central in enabling people to access education and to feel that they can take an active part in the organisation of their education; enabling the construction of knowledge in “flexible and accessible places” (MINCI 2005). While programmes are validated by the Institute of Higher Education (IE) and each course area has standards of attainment that have to be reached, the emphasis is on co-responsibility and social control by local actors to transform the education system. Testimonies of students I interviewed reveal the importance of this expansion and

municipalisation of education for the Venezuelan people. Even after Chávez came to power, many poor people still lacked self-confidence and believed that University education was not for “the likes of them”. In the first place, several reported that they had taken part in organising and conducting the original census in 2003 and that this was an important first step in increasing both self-esteem and a sense of belonging. One student, Francisco (October 2009), explained that for many years the people in the barrios felt left out of national development and felt that they were invisible. He used the example of the fact that pre-Chávez most maps of Caracas did not show many of the barrios, instead they appeared as green areas. This illustrated and reinforced the idea that the poor were “outside” society and therefore worthless. He explained that the census allowed people to take an active part in their community through organising and conducting the census and that the process brought communities into direct contact with government and state officials, many for the first time. The census process reinforced the feeling of belonging and self-worth and the idea of education as a right rather than, as seen during the *Punto Fijo* years, as a privilege or gift ‘from above’. The *Punto Fijo* Pact was a formal power-sharing agreement between Venezuela’s three main parties, agreed in 1958.

Many also explained that the Education Missions had allowed them to access education whereas before they were excluded, mainly for financial reasons and because of active exclusion by the “old” universities. The idea of bringing the University to the people rather than them having to go to the old Universities was symbolically as well as practically important. They were now able to work during the day and study at night in a centre near where they lived and were able to take an active part in the organisation and implementation of the programmes. The Education Missions have had an inclusive and empowering effect on the poor who feel that for the first time they have the right to an education and that they are important in the process of nation-building as co-creators of their own society.

Hanoman and Hunn (2008) conclude that the democratisation of education in Venezuela in terms of the widening access to all levels of the education system as a right is an important starting point for participatory democracy. However, while these are necessary elements they are not sufficient. The idea of education as a right is not peculiar to Venezuela, nor does it guarantee a more participatory, protagonist form of democracy. Social democratic governments have also implemented Welfare States with free education promoted as a right. However, Cornwall and Coelho (2004) caution that all too often invited spaces are created in a top-down direction and may ultimately restrict transformation. It is therefore important to examine how participation in the Missions is organised internally as well as how education links with wider processes and mechanisms of decision-making and social change.

Democratisation of knowledge and Democratisation *through* knowledge

Heaney (1993: 16) argues that “the most effective power is exercised by the control of knowledge”. During the *Punto Fijo* years in Venezuela, access to knowledge was used as a form of control. As Jose, a Mission Sucre student explained, “we suffered from a poverty of knowledge and this lack of knowledge was a form of slavery” (February 2009). In response to this legacy, Article 15 of the Law of Education of 2009 explicitly states that the purpose of

education is “to develop a new political culture based on protagonist participation and the strengthening of popular power; the democratisation of knowledge”. The emphasis is on the municipalisation of education and the need for widespread participation of academics, students, workers and communities in the co-management of education to facilitate the construction of new organisational relations between the state and society in the organisation, content and implementation of programmes. The discourse of the Education Missions draws heavily on Freirean conceptions of popular education in terms of horizontal relations of organisation within the programme, the co-production of the curriculum and the importance of debate and dialogue. Guidelines for democratic planning are provided but it is up to each programme to put them into practice. The idea is that state institutions participate in the organisation of the Missions, but the programmes are not subordinate to traditional bureaucratic structures. This is reminiscent of Lenin's dual power or Gramsci's war of position in that, at least in theory, participants are able to practice alternative modes of democratic organisation and develop a new hegemony based on democratic co-operation that holds the possibility of wider structural impacts. Testimonies from the people I interviewed as well as my observations of particular programmes suggest that the Education Missions have enabled this sort of discourse to be put into practice, as I illustrate in subsequent sections.

Horizontal relations of organisation

The Missions are predominantly based in, organised and run by the community, in parallel to the existing formal education system, which allows them to escape much of the centralised state bureaucracy whilst still developing state-grassroots relations. Certainly the programmes I observed were based on democratic forms of organisation. Students vote for their programme Co-ordinators, their Programme Spokespeople and their Subject spokespeople and have the right to revoke all elected persons. Students, Facilitators and Coordinators in all the programmes I observed also talked about more horizontal relations in terms of planning programmes, transparency about budgetary figures and resource allocation, and in the construction of the curriculum. The Missions do still have elements of vertical organisation in that they have to register with the central Foundation and courses are validated by the Ministry of Education, but there is much less bureaucracy and considerable localised input and autonomy (Ziritt and Huerta 2007). This is further illustrated in the way that the curriculum is organised.

Co-construction of the curriculum

The co-construction of the curriculum is most apparent in Mission Sucre. Missions Robinson and Ribas use video curriculums and are therefore less flexible in terms of curriculum organisation but there is still space for debate and reflection. Mission Sucre delivers undergraduate courses in key thematic areas such as Environmental Management, Social Communication, Travel and Tourism, Public Administration and Electronic Engineering. While guidelines are set for core competencies that have to be reached, there is considerable scope for students to adapt the curriculum to their own contexts and experiences. This idea of

constructing the curriculum out of the life experiences, aspirations, demands and problems of the participants was central to Freire's work and is evident in the programmes I observed. While some sessions resembled more traditional "banking" education, students were also encouraged to relate this knowledge to their own context and experiences and a lot of time was given to dialogue and critical discussion of causes and solutions to both local and global problems. Much discussion focused on how neoliberalism had shaped Venezuelan society and on what a post-neoliberal socialism for the twenty-first century might look like and the policies and processes needed to make this vision a reality. Furthermore, these classes were complemented by practical classes where students went out into their local environment to "put theory into practice". Clear links were made between learning and the community and the students worked much more in groups rather than in competition with each other, thus emphasising the importance of the active construction of knowledge to advance both individual and collective interests.

This co-construction is also evident in the classes in socio-political formation. While these classes are a compulsory part of the Education Missions, their organisation and content is communally constructed within each programme and adapted to the particular needs, skills and interests of the students and facilitators. The government does not provide primers for socio-political formation, allowing for considerable flexibility in terms of individual course content and format. Rather than transmitting the official government line, these classes developed from the demands of the students and enabled them to learn about a range of political theory.

Overall, the expansion of education and new ways of organising education within the Education Missions has contributed to the democratisation of knowledge in terms of reinforcing the idea of education as a right, the expansion of who has access to knowledge, and in terms of what and whose knowledge is valued. The control of knowledge has been extended beyond traditional "experts" to include popular input in the way education is organised and in the content of that education. This is not about idealising people's knowledge and skills or their ability to self-govern, but developing democratic spaces in which they can develop as learners, enhance their knowledge and practice democracy for themselves. The Missions therefore have an important impact on expanding whose knowledge "counts" and democratising control over knowledge production. It is this emphasis on democratic organisation and community participation rather than top-down provision that distinguishes the Missions and the Venezuelan process more generally from social democratic and top-down socialist endeavours (Hanoman and Hunn 2008; Wilpert 2007). However, it is also important to explore if and how what is taught develops critical consciousness and mobilisation for change; to democratisation *through* knowledge.

Socio-political formation: critical consciousness or indoctrination?

Ideological education forms a central element of the Education Missions and the 5th Motor of the Revolution stressed the need for "education with socialist values". Official literature stresses the need for integrating dialogue and critical thought into all subject disciplines. All

students, regardless of subject area, have compulsory weekly classes in socio-political studies that are argued to be important in consolidating education about, for and through democracy within a framework where democracy is conceptualised as combining representative, direct and participatory democracy. Socio-political education in the Missions is seen as important to break with the individualism and domination of past hegemony and, by building critical consciousness, to constructing a new hegemony of the people. For example, Francisco, a facilitator in Mission Sucre, outlined the importance of socio-political study in the Missions saying,

... you have to socialise people and this is very difficult. It's more than anything an ideological problem. Many people are with the process but they don't understand it. Many people will go on a march, put on a red shirt but they don't know why they are marching. So ideologically we are lacking. The Missions are an important space in which to start to change this (November 2009).

Critics of the classes in socio-political formation, including the majority of opposition supporters I interviewed, argue that it is a clear case of government indoctrination to enforce their hegemony, based on Cuba-style indoctrination. Griffiths (2009a) and Griffiths and Williams (2009) point out that one of the problems with political education in Cuba was that the liberatory potential of political formation was often reduced to 'banking' style enforcement of official ideologies and an emphasis on education to serve the needs of the economy, with limited opportunity for critical engagement. Similarly Arnove and Torres (1995) argue that in Nicaragua, while education programmes such as the National Literacy Campaign and Popular Basic Education did allow for debate and discussion of grassroots problems and demands, there was also a tendency for them to act as forums to transmit the political line of the Sandinistas.

In Venezuela clear links are also made between education and the economy and there is also an emphasis on the need to create the "new person" and instil new values as was seen in Cuba and Nicaragua. However, many of the students and facilitators I interviewed refer to the influence of Simon Rodriguez, Paulo Freire and Fals Borda on Venezuelan education, and say that the main goal is "rescuing humanist values: ideological principles of justice, truth, peace, equality and social participation" (Gilverto: Assistant Co-ordinator of Mission Sucre, September 2009). They argue that the values that are taught are not about teaching loyalty to the government or the imposition of a doctrine, they are a commitment to progressive social change. This is supported by Griffiths (2009b) who says that the values that are stressed are universal values of solidarity and humanity rather than simply trying to enforce obedience to the government "line". Certainly the Education Missions do have an overtly political agenda: to construct an alternative democracy. While Ellner (2011, 2009) argues that this overt politicisation violates the separation of powers between public and private spheres, supporters argue that, while this may be true, it is done overtly with the clear sense that "the personal is political", in line with principles of popular education that call for an overt commitment to the oppressed. Socio-political formation in Venezuela is seen as a means of counterbalancing the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism and exploring alternatives.

Testimonies of students and facilitators, as well as my observations of socio-political classes and classes more generally, suggest that the accusations of indoctrination are exaggerated. The organisation of the classes allows for debate and dialogue, especially as the students have input on the curriculum and there is no primer for socio-political education dictated from above. Any government-produced materials that were used stress the rights and duties guaranteed in the Constitution and the importance of protagonist participation, rather than reinforcing a particular doctrine. Also, a wide range of political and pedagogical theory, such as the works of Freire, Gramsci, Gadotti and Marti, is made available by the government: distributed either for free or at discounted prices in government-subsidised bookstores. My research suggests that, through these classes, students are developing skills that they use to critically evaluate their society, rather than simply repeating the government “line” or being taught allegiance to the government. For example, one Mission Sucre student I interviewed explained that

socio-political theory is concerned with political formation, but not political formation in terms of the political thought of the Party. No; political from the point of view of society. It's about realising the role that you have as an individual within the community and wider society; what's known as emancipatory or liberatory education. Not just education but building consciousness as a social being (October 2009).

Similarly, Rogelio, a Mission Sucre student, said that

people without education, who lack consciousness, are easily dominated. We want political knowledge so we can understand what position our country is in and how we can help our country. And this is not a form of brain manipulation; it's democracy. We are gaining consciousness (March 2010).

I found that there is considerable scope for debate within the classes, not only to develop critiques of neoliberalism, but also the changes made since 1998. I attended many classes where students engaged in lively critical debates about particular articles of the Constitution, particular Laws, problems with particular departments and individuals in government, economic reforms, and ongoing problems such as inflation and food prices. Many expressed ongoing shortcomings of the state and government in terms of continued centralisation of power and of ongoing problems with clientelism and corruption; highlighting that some within the current regime are actively seeking to perpetuate this old hegemony at the macro level and that old norms are, at times, reproduced in new forms of community participation at the micro level. For example, one student explained, “there are still people who say they are with the revolution but they are there to steal. We know this but with greater consciousness we can change this” (December 2009). Similarly Carmen, a Mission Sucre student, said that the classes have given her the tools to fight for the society that she wants and that this is her right in a democratic society. She said “we have much greater ability to organise ourselves and we have more ideological knowledge. For example, if the government do something I don't agree with I don't just have to accept it. I have many ideas about what to do” (October 2010). My observations and interviews with students suggest that classes in political formation contribute to the development of critical consciousness that goes beyond securing

passive support for government hegemony and that students are developing skills which they use to critique progress made to date.

D'Elia (2006) and Hanoman and Hunn (2008) suggest that while there may not be overt indoctrination in the Missions, there may be more subtle forces at play that limit discourse in opposition to government ideology, thus limiting the scope of critical consciousness. I agree, in part, with their findings. The extreme polarisation in Venezuelan society restricts opportunities for meaningful debate because the hard line opposition refuse to acknowledge anything positive in government policies and programmes and the hard line 'Chavistas' refuse to acknowledge any critiques from the opposition. Nevertheless, while issues of polarisation need to be addressed, it is too simplistic to argue that the education process is restricted within the structure of the government political ideology as D'Elia (2006) and Hanoman and Hunn (2008) suggest. What seems more apparent is that government ideology in terms of critiques of neoliberalism and an emphasis on participatory, protagonist democracy, equality and justice, is largely congruent with local ideas, critiques and desires.

Furthermore, the interviews and observations I conducted suggest that many students use the knowledge they gain in the Missions to interrogate the process and identify ongoing problems and limitations in ways that lead to greater critique rather than conformity to the government. In teaching the skills to resist neoliberal hegemony and emphasising the need to find alternatives, the Missions contain spaces for the construction of counter-alternatives rather than just accepting the government's proposed alternative as the 'only' alternative. The Education Missions illustrate the potential of political education via state-led education programmes to develop critical consciousness and promote an alternative vision of democracy. They promote the intellectual curiosity that Müller (2007) argues should be the main objective of state-led education. However, it is also important to examine the extent to which the Missions increase awareness of the need to translate critique into action for social change.

The Community Project: learning democracy by doing

The Community Project is a compulsory part of Mission Ribas, Mission Sucre and Mission Cultura. In contrast to many projects to promote 'active citizenship' within a neoliberal or social democratic framework, the Community Project in the Venezuelan Education Missions is framed within principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and popular education, and is promoted as being central to the project of promoting social change rather than stability. Alfredo, a Mission Sucre student, explained that

the community project entails a relationship between the students and the community because the fundamental idea of our process is that the people, the community become involved in solving their own problems and changing society (November 2009).

Many barrios in Venezuela had a historical legacy of low self-esteem and limited self-organisation. The Community Project gives many people their first experience of interacting with their community and in planning projects. It therefore increases their skills and their

self-confidence to take an active part in their community and promotes joining existing organisations and setting up new projects. Students also reported that carrying out the Project was important in raising their consciousness of problems and resources in their own community. It enabled them to research Laws and regulations to find out what rights they had in relation to specific problems and how they could go about solving them. At the same time, they felt that they were learning from the community and sharing their own learning with the community.

While, to an extent, the Community Projects foster ideas of self-help and volunteerism, they are not framed within a discourse of charitable work with an underlying agenda of “rolling back the state”. Many actually result in students and communities mobilising to demand more resources from the State in line with constitutional guarantees and many generate new paid work for community members, funded by the state. The discourse is not about “helping others” but on working with and within the community to build ideas of solidarity, working together and using professional skills to develop the community and society as a whole. Furthermore, the Projects are framed within a discourse of duties *and* rights thus combining ideas of building the “responsible citizen” and the “responsible state”.

A major critique is that many of the Community Projects relate to small-scale local issues to improve the local community and have so far failed to impact on the mainstream public sector (Estaba et al. 2006). Many of the Projects *are* concerned with addressing communities’ most pressing needs, particularly infrastructural problems. However, students pointed out that after years of neglect, these were the areas of most pressing need in a country that when President Chávez came to power had around 70% of its people living in poverty and very poor or non-existent basic services. Furthermore, testimonies of Mission participants illustrate that Projects can and do impact on the mainstream public sector and encourage community interaction with the State for change beyond the local level. As pressing needs are met, students and their communities are starting to make more widespread demands.

Ramirez (1990) says that education, particularly adult education, constitutes a tool to enable the participation of communities in their own development. The Education Missions clearly give people the opportunity to learn how to participate effectively and interact with the state to contribute to their community’s development. As one student explained,

for the first time the people have the power to make decisions and mechanisms have been created to facilitate popular participation. You need to look at everything that’s happening at the grassroots. Now the people increasingly make their own demands. There has been an explosion of popular organising; of popular power (March 2010).

Ongoing challenges

As pressing social needs are met, economic concerns and dissatisfaction with new elites emerging within the movement are starting to come to the fore, and the question of what social forces will gain hegemony within the movement and in society more generally is becoming more prominent. While many people cite positive changes in Venezuela in terms of opportunities for protagonist participation and direct input on policy decision-making, there

are still ongoing problems that restrict the process of social change and point to a discrepancy between theory and practice; most importantly in terms of corruption and inefficiency at the meso and macro levels, shortcomings with the accountability mechanisms designed to make both state and government receptive to and responsive to demands, and major challenges continue in terms of how to maintain and expand participation. Lopez Maya (2008: 169) concludes that

while the social dynamics of the revolution are characterised by their vital and open nature, in the sphere of politics there appears to be a sort of regressive evolution towards a closing of the space for participatory and democratic decision-making. Venezuela in this sense seems to be moving in the direction of a politically less democratic society.

As Ellner (2010) points out, the Venezuelan experience reflects a general historical tendency for socialist nations to perform well on the social front but with less impact on power relations beyond the local level. He argues that while the Venezuelan process has created a strong sense of “power to” and “power with” that are crucial in the creation of a new hegemony, measures to address “power over” are still in gestation. This is certainly a concern voiced by both government supporters and opponents that I spoke to. While many people are generally positive about the avenues available to exercise democracy and participate in the process from the grassroots, there is an increasing dissatisfaction that the pace of change from above has not been sufficient. For example, one Caracas resident's testimony is typical of many of the frustrations people expressed. She said,

many in the Ministries and elsewhere fear popular power and don't want to comply. They still have the mentality of the old system, the fourth republic, they want to keep hold of their power and so block the process. Yes we have democracy, we have power, but we need Laws to be enforced (March 2010).

In spite of considerable progress, the process could still fail (Lebowitz 2007); particularly if these inherent tendencies to block the redistribution of power in the political arena are not addressed. As Chodor (2009) concludes, there are radical and important changes underway in Venezuela but the project has by no means gained hegemony; many of the institutions of state and organised society still work to actively undermine the revolutionary project and the country remains highly polarised. Authoritarian tendencies in government are reminiscent of Gramsci's organic crisis in which the old is dying but the new is not yet born.

These tensions and contradictions lead commentators such as Gates (2010) and Robinson (2008) to argue that Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution is currently at a crossroads and that class struggle is likely to become more prominent in Venezuelan society. For example, Robinson (2008: 9) points out that many people are starting to complain that the process is moving too slowly, and that problems are grounded not only in resistance from old elites but also new internal elites. This is certainly a viewpoint voiced by many people I have interviewed in Venezuela, especially since the death of President Chávez in 2013. While “further advances in defining and applying 21st century socialism in Venezuela are very possible” (Wilpert 2007: 36), serious obstacles remain and new fragmentations are emerging in the country. The old ruling class remains intent on blocking fundamental change, and a

new bureaucracy has emerged within the revolution that has developed in its own interests and risks alienating not only the middle class but the core support. This leads to questions as to what social and political forces will achieve hegemony in the anti-neoliberal struggle and what kind of project will emerge. The working class as an organised coherent group has so far played a marginal role in the processes of change but could well become decisive for the future of the revolution (Gates 2010). Many people I interviewed also emphasised the ongoing importance of education in the struggle, both as a means of developing the critical consciousness needed to assess progress to date and formulate solutions to ongoing problems, and as a means of promoting the protagonist participation necessary to overcome these obstacles.

Concluding thoughts

Griffiths (2009: 12) argues that

the Venezuelan case highlights the potential for substantial policy alternatives to neo-liberalism ... Venezuela provides a unique space for both the radical expansion of education and for alternative pedagogies and curriculum practices to be debated and developed which may contribute to the transformation of contemporary capitalist society. Historical cases like this are rare.

The crisis of neoliberalism in the region has opened up “space for the construction of counter-hegemony” including arguments for autonomism and arguments for a re-appraisal of the state (Boden 2011: 97). The current process in Venezuela proposes an alternative that focuses on the latter; on taking state power *and* redefining and transforming state-society relations through social change from above and below (Figueroa 2006: 189-203). As Irazabal and Foley (2010: 98-99) argue, while the Venezuelan process is “enmeshed with complexities and contradictions... one of the main achievements is to give people hope that a socialist alternative is possible” and with this comes the possibility of consolidating a counter-hegemonic alternative to neoliberalism. Many people feel empowered by these changes and importantly feel that they have a greater ability to participate in decision-making and influence the process from below. It is this level of participation that distinguishes the Venezuelan process from past social democratic or state-led ‘socialist’ projects. It offers a useful example to explore how counter-hegemony “walks on both legs” (Carroll 2006: 21) in that it is simultaneously a process of parallelism *and* state control, of building new counter-hegemonic institutions and ideology *and* using the old state to do this. Despite ongoing problems there is a real sense among the people I interviewed and from secondary research into the process that the creation of bottom-up parallel structures of political power hold the potential, though not the certainty, as Gramsci stresses, to one day supplant old state structures and give agency to the people. As one *Cano Amarillo* resident explained,

Here we are in a state of transition. We find ourselves in a country in transformation, moving to another system that is much more humanist, much more participatory, much more protagonist; a system that has as its source the importance of participation, the importance of the people: a different ideology, a different socialism (February 2010).

The 'Bolivarian Revolution' therefore transcends the simplistic debate between taking or opposing state power, and offers an arena to explore how working "in and against the state" might develop in practice (Boden 2011; Ciccariello-Maher 2007). As Harnecker (2007:149) argues, "although it may seem contradictory to some, it is possible, from above, to encourage people to build democratic power from below" and Venezuela's Education Missions illustrate the potential but also the ongoing challenges of making such a radical project reality.

As Arnaldo, a Mission Sucre facilitator said (December 2009),

For people to participate we have to transform the consciousness of the people; to put into action the will of the people. This is the theory and praxis of socialism. The Missions have served to provide essential basic elements and offer other possibilities for the management of state politics and policies. Through and beyond the Missions is the conscious mobilisation of will. Before, the people were demobilised at an ideological level, at a political level. But now they have achieved huge mobilisation from the grassroots, some in opposition and some for, but the key is they are mobilising and this is a great basis that we have achieved as a country. With this new idea of power, comes the idea that we can control the administration of resources, that we can overcome the bureaucracy and the corruption. This is the way to consolidate our socialist society. We need to consolidate this control and management and organise ourselves.

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CLAD sobre la Reforma del Estado y de la Administración Pública, Sto. Domingo,
Dominican Republic, 30 October - 2 November

Author details

Maura Duffy is a Lecturer at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester. She was awarded her PhD in International Development, entitled ‘Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution: Power to the People?’ by the Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester in 2012. Her research interests focus on international development and social change, in particular, state-grassroots interactions in Venezuela. Correspondence: maura.duffy@manchester.ac.uk