

Mass schooling for socialist transformation in Cuba and Venezuela¹

Tom G. Griffiths

University of Newcastle, Australia

Jo Williams

Victoria University, Australia

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Abstract

In contemporary contexts of Education for All and emphases on national educational performance, mass education globally continues to be strongly informed by human capital thinking, and by notions of developing future world citizens and workers for the international economy. In this paper, our central focus is on the ongoing educational project of Cuba, and more recent educational reforms in Venezuela as part of its Bolivarian Revolution, to explicitly direct mass schooling to a socialist transformation of society. Drawing on formal policy documents, international reports, and secondary research, we consider the two countries' achievements on universal access and equity in schooling, as orthodox measures of a system's performance, and their policies and strategies for preparing 'new socialist citizens' who will directly contribute to and/or consolidate the social and economic transformation of society. Our major focus here is on whether and how mass schooling can prepare citizens to contribute to the construction of authentic alternatives to capitalism. We acknowledge some major tensions and contradictions in such a project, but argue that with the benefit of learning from the experience of previous socialist experiments, there are heightened opportunities for Cuba and Venezuela to make significant gains in this area, and hence to advance theorising about such a model of mass education for contemporary times.

Introduction

The expansion of systems of mass education, and their ongoing reform, is a global phenomenon, exemplified in the contemporary Education for All (EFA) agenda linked to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This global phenomenon comes with an array of assumptions about the purposes and benefits of mass education. These include long-standing instrumental objectives linked to human capital theory, seeking to measure the rate of return on investments in education (see Klees, 2008 for a recent critique of such approaches), and idealist conceptions of forming national and increasingly world citizens, with the skills and dispositions for effective participation in an imagined world society (see Meyer, 2006). We could increase this list, and of course point to locally specific variations of and responses to these global trends, but the expansion and reform of mass education clearly shows key points of convergence across institutionalised systems at a world level.

One significant feature of this global movement toward mass education has been the resultant identification of disadvantaged groups based on their social class status, and their linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds. Bowles and Gintis' (1976) groundbreaking study initiated a line of research focused on the subsequent function of schooling in the reproduction and legitimisation of capitalism and capitalist inequalities. Their Marxist critique of schooling in capitalist society was taken up by people like Apple (1979; 1982a, 1982b) who highlighted how the interests of the dominant social class were reflected and reinforced in the organisational structures, curricula and teaching practices of education systems. A result has been a global trend not of socialist transformation to redress these outcomes, as advocated by Bowles and Gintis (1976), but of acknowledging the reality of inequity and formulating policy responses designed to reduce these and move toward more authentically meritocratic systems (Stromquist, 2005). That is, systems for the differential distribution of educational credentials, which in turn translate into differential social and economic returns, that are determined more genuinely by individuals' interest, effort and abilities, rather than their socio-economic background.

Of course it is difficult to dismiss such goals, particularly if incremental pedagogical and curricular reforms can reduce gaps in performance between established 'equity groups', and simultaneously lift all students' intellectual development and achievement. The apparent difficulty systems have in making progress on these meritocratic goals suggests that they aim high, evident for example in the contemporary attention given to the performance by countries like Finland on Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and – Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures of overall student performance and equity between groups of students (see for example Simola, 2005). This persistence of inequities linked to the social and economic background of students, however, also highlights the extent to which even the full realisation of meritocratic goals is dependent on broader social change. That is, change which moves beyond a more equitable distribution of the unequal and limited material rewards of social and economic life under capitalism. As Starr (1991) succinctly concluded:

Social justice is always controversial in theory and imperfect in practice. In education we talk about things like 'equality of outcomes' or 'equality of learning outcomes'. To think that we could single-handedly achieve this without dismantling existing power structures is naïve. Some kinds of social justice are just not achievable because they are at odds with the political and economic forces which shape

our society. If society stays the way it is, there are some kinds of social justice that we can never have. (p. 24).

Our focus in this paper is on the potential of mass education to contribute to political projects of transforming society toward models of socialism, looking at the experiences of Cuba and Venezuela. We do this given contemporary interest in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, which began with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, and the subsequent project of defining and developing a model of 21st century socialism, and the ongoing efforts of Cuba, 50 years after the triumph of its popular revolution, to refine a model of socialism for this century. The reform of mass education in these contexts is part of a wider historical phenomenon in which the political function of mass education is acknowledged and overtly directed to projects of political, social and economic transformation. These include the former 'real existing socialist' states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, but also post-colonial states seeking national independence / liberation (see for example Carnoy and Samoff's 1990 classic text).

In what follows we first review achievements in both countries in terms of providing universal access to, and equity within, systems of mass education. We do this to highlight the capacity to make substantial gains against these measures in relatively short time periods with the accompanying political will and associated social and economic programs. This is followed by an examination of the intended role of mass schooling within these contexts, and some of the attempts to have schooling contribute directly to the reproduction and legitimisation of a socialist alternative to capitalism. Perhaps most importantly, we look to possibilities for overcoming some of the most negative historical tendencies experienced during the period of intense Soviet influence in Cuba from the early 1970s. Moreover, we identify efforts to prepare citizens with the knowledge, skills and revolutionary dispositions required to actively struggle for and apply a democratic socialist practice in their social, political and working lives within and beyond the school, and within and beyond the nation. In so doing, we contribute to a central question for radical educators: How can a system of mass, State education, contribute to the development of a citizenry prepared to engage in a process of socialist construction?

Universal access with equity

At first glance, the experiences of both Cuba and Venezuela seem to simply align with the current global emphasis on *Education for All* (EFA) as promoted by UNESCO and other international institutions and Non Governmental Organisations. Indeed, Venezuela cites its progress toward this and other Millennium Development Goals as evidence of the government's social and economic achievements (Asamblea Nacional, 2008; República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2004). The modest educational MDGs however, seeking universal access to primary schooling by 2015, highlight the apparent incapacity of such basic social outcomes to be achieved in sites exploited first by colonial rulers, then devastated by the new imperialism of global capitalism and the accompanying imposition of neoliberal policy by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation, to reduce public expenditure and shift the cost of services like education away from the State and onto individuals (Brock-Utne, 2007; Jones, 2007; Robertson, 2005). The educational policies and enacted practices of Cuba and Venezuela, as critical components of society-wide struggles against the capitalist system, are accompanied by social and economic policies that provide the necessary material preconditions for students' access to and democratic participation in education, typically overlooked in other educational reform projects. What Cuba and Venezuela clearly demonstrate is that with a fundamental shift in the political economy towards socialism, universal access to education, with a high degree of equity in terms of opportunity and outcomes, is something that can be achieved quite quickly.

Prior to the Cuban Revolution the education system reflected the systemic social inequalities present under the Batista regime, with less than half of Cuban children in schools, more than 1 million illiterates, and an average educational level of less than Grade 3 (Gasperini, 2000). The new government launched an ambitious campaign to massively increase educational access, spearheaded by a nationwide literacy campaign (M^{ac}Donald, 1985). The campaign's success lay not only in its achievement of mass literacy, but in the politicisation of the hundreds of thousands of young volunteers who participated as teachers, and the new relationships they forged with predominantly peasant farmers who they taught. This mass initiative involved hundreds of thousands of volunteers who, in addition to assuming teaching roles, helped to build large numbers of new schools and educational buildings, often in buildings left vacant by sections of the Cuban bourgeoisie who left the country to await the reversal of the Revolution. The popular literacy campaign was closely followed by the rapid but systematic expansion of child-care and schooling as children moved through the systems, alongside parallel programs of adult education to raise the education level of those who had been historically excluded from education. A contemporary example

of this emphasis is *La Universidad Para Todos* (The University for All), a government initiative involving a range of educational programs broadcast on Cuban television, accompanied by a range of broadsheets available at a nominal cost, covering specialised academic subjects like Physics, Linguistics, Chemistry, History etc, to more popular topics like healthy eating (see: http://www.medioambiente.cu/universidad_todos.asp).

In a very different context, Venezuela has emulated the Cuban focus on systematically overcoming illiteracy, extending adults' subsequent education, and rapidly expanding all levels of formal, public education. Since coming to power in 1999, the Chávez government has directed unprecedented levels of public resources to the reform of the public system of education, renamed the Bolivarian Education System (BES), and a system of parallel Adult education missions (see for example Asamblea Nacional, 2008; Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y Desarrollo, 2008). In particular, access has been extended to traditionally disadvantaged and/or excluded groups: the urban and rural poor, those of African descent, and indigenous communities. These achievements rest on the Constitutional reforms of the Bolivarian Republic of 2000, which affirmed for example that “Education is a fundamental human right and social obligation which is free, obligatory and democratic”, and that “everyone has a right to comprehensive, quality, ongoing education, under equal conditions for equal opportunities, regardless of their abilities, aspirations or vocation” (see Article 103, Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2000, p. 103).

On this constitutional basis, immediate responses to these and other measures of exclusion from education, based on social class, indigenous status and ethnicity, included an increase in public expenditure on public education from 3.38% of GDP in 1998 when Chávez was first elected, to 5.43% in 2007 (Chávez, 2008). This figure increases to more than 7% if federal government expenditure on the educational missions is included, along with State and local government expenditure (p.33). Between 1998 and 2006 participation rates have increased from 44.7% to 60.6% for pre-school (0-6) age children; from 89.7% to 99.5% for primary school age children; from 27.3% to 41% for secondary school age children; and from 21.8 to 30.2 for tertiary education (Chávez, 2008, pp. 47-57).

Cuba's literacy campaign highlighted to the government a range of other social issues, most notably in the area of health and childcare, requiring urgent attention as social policy objectives in and of themselves, and as actions to create the necessary conditions for equitable educational outcomes to be realised. Practical and immediate policies followed, providing material support to people to facilitate their full participation in the campaign and subsequent initiatives. These included serious attention to all areas of social infrastructure – for example

housing, transport, utilities, health care – alongside employment, targeted education scholarships, the provision of meals, books and uniforms for students. Together these policies supported the rapid expansion of education in ways that simultaneously, directly confronted class-based disadvantage and exclusion. Carnoy et al. (2007) provide a recent, positive appraisal of the impact of such an approach, which they identify as “state generated social capital” (p. 144), on student performance.

In similar fashion, the Bolivarian project in Venezuela has explicitly identified and targeted the social and economic basis of educational disadvantage and social exclusion. In the Venezuelan context, the response has included a wide range of social programs (*misiones*) like the provision of free health care (*Misión Barrio Adentro* supported by Cuban doctors working in community health clinics), *Misión Mercal* providing subsidised food through a network of State run supermarkets and food kitchens to marginalised sectors, and improved public transport and general infrastructure (Germán Sánchez, 2005a; Germán Sánchez, 2005b). Education missions provide non-formal education for adults, coordinated through a national, state and municipal organisational structure. Each mission is distinct, but generally involves units addressing: teaching and pedagogy; the logistics of coordinating venues and equipment to facilitate classes; the administration of funding; and social units who work with local communities to ensure students have adequate housing, healthcare, recreation and cultural facilities. Furthermore, each mission involves a staff unit known as *Atención Laboral*, which monitors the work situation of students and their families, working with local communities to establish cooperatives in agriculture and other sectors.

Linked to programs like these are associated achievements like those cited by Chávez (2008), including the provision of meals in schools for over two million students (p.58), reduced income inequality (p.75), and high rates of popular satisfaction with Venezuelan democracy (p.84), all underpinning efforts to extend participation in education toward universal access. A current focus is on incorporating all public schools into the BES, under a model of integral education that involves extended, single-session school days for students (with meals provided), subject specific classes in the mornings, and integrated projects linked to community needs in the afternoons. Weisbrot and Sandoval (2007) report that central government social spending in Venezuela increased from 8.2% of GDP in 1998 to 13.6% in 2006, this figure excluding social spending from the national oil company (PDVSA), which adds a further 7.3% of GDP (p.2). These and other reforms amount to direct State investment in individuals’ capacity to participate in education, aligning with Carnoy et al.’s. (2007) conception of state generated social capital: an alternative take on the term “social capital”,

seen universally as a key factor for student participation and success in education, but increasingly left to individual families to provide according to their socio-economic status, thus reproducing class divisions through education.

The responses of the revolutionary governments of Cuba and Venezuela highlight perhaps the single most outstanding contrast with other systems, and hence a major element of difference impacting on educational outcomes: the role of social goals, including educational goals and policy, driving the political economy, rather than education being constructed by the demands of the political economy (López Hurtado, et al., 1996, pp.14-25). Education in Cuba, and increasingly in Venezuela, is put forward then as a social good and a central factor shaping the system of production and general economic organisation.

Education for a democratic, protagonistic and participatory socialism

On the question of schooling for socialist transformation, significant gains have been made in Cuba since 1959, perhaps best evidenced by the capacity of the Cuban revolution to survive and reinvent itself in the post-Soviet period. In particular, we note Cuba's attempts to directly link mass education to other politicised social organisations, and its integration of manual labour as a core component of schooling. The overly instrumentalist application of Soviet orthodoxy to education, and other aspects of society post-1970, produced negative tendencies, which had a de-politicising effect. Some of these errors were officially acknowledged with the *rectification campaign* that began in 1986, well before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and which sought a return to Che Guevara's ideas and a renewed attention to the political and ideological formation of Cuba's youth. From here we move to the very different context of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution in its initial stages of an attempted transformation of society towards a model of 21st century socialism, and identify radical possibilities to learn from the lessons of Cuba, and of socialist experiments more widely.

From the outset, education in Revolutionary Cuba was conceived in terms of its potential to contribute to and consolidate the revolution, and from the 1961 declaration of its socialist character, its potential to contribute to the socialist objectives of this political project. The development of Cuban students as conscious, critical participants in education and society emerged as an explicit political goal, positioning students as the future, youthful agents required for the transformation of society (see for example the then Minister for Education, Armando Hart, 1962). Education was considered as the arena in which the human subject could become conscious of their abilities to influence society and history, both by

advancing in technological know-how and inventiveness and by developing their intellectual capacities as social interpreters and protagonists (López Hurtado, Hernández, Conte, Alfonso, & Rodríguez, 2000). Cole (2002) cites the well-known Cuban Marxist theoretician, Fernando Martínez Heredia (1993), who writes that the process of socialist development was “premised on the unleashing of the *power of the people*, who learn to change themselves along with their circumstances” (p. 44).

Although not normally associated with education, Che Guevara’s writing played a significant role in the early development of a revolutionary approach to education. In the now famous text, *Man and Socialism in Cuba*, he referred to education as a fundamental aspect of liberation, and the key to unlocking all the creative and human potential of the human race (Guevara, 1964). He noted that alongside the structural changes made by the Cuban revolution, major and sustained efforts would be required to deepen the population’s conscious participation, individual and collective, in all the structures of governance, management and production (Guevara, 1991, p. 216). For Guevara, such efforts demanded an approach to education that rejected formalistic or uncritical transmission of slogans and socialist values, and instead focused on more authentic and deep learning, debate, and the everyday practice of these values.

The political formation of students in Cuba was tied to the heightened levels of overt politicisation of society, and all aspects of social life, post-1959. Whereas in capitalist society the different social layers of young people’s lives are frequently disconnected and contradictory, in Cuba the experiences of family, school and community were to be positively and explicitly connected in a learning environment that fostered both individual personal development, with an emphasis on its social value, and the development of collective values and outlooks (Cerdeira, Assaél, Ceballos, & Sepúlveda, 2000). Further, Robledo (1999) argues that Cuba’s mass social organisations, its neighbourhood communities and councils, and its school and classroom structures of decision-making, were designed with a view to supporting and facilitating the empowerment of student, family, and community involvement in education systems.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Cuba’s revolutionary education was the application of a model of work-study, as an integral part of students’ civic and political formation. This policy involved students undertaking structured manual work via first *Schools to the countryside*, and then full boarding *School in the countryside* (see Figueroa, Prieto, & Guitérrez, 1974). This emphasis on manual labour, contributing directly to national economy and its model of socialist distribution of goods and services, was based in Marxist

understandings of students' consciousness being shaped by these direct experiences and conditions, and hence was mirrored in programs of voluntary work for students in the cities, promoted by the Young Communist Union (UJC). While the outcomes of this approach were contradictory (see for example Griffiths, 2005), the work-study model complemented a curricular emphasis on social responsibility, whereby Cuban students actively take on a range of social tasks inside and outside the classroom. Examples of such activity include municipal inspections as part of the campaign to rid Havana of the Dengue carrying mosquito, preventative preparations for the cyclone season in July and the regular tasks of repairing books and cleaning the school and municipality. Cuban policy has set out to develop a methodology of learning through meaningful engagement in and reflection on the socio-historical process. This approach is quite distinct from many of the educational blueprints that various progressive educationalists have popularised, where the model takes on a certain independence from the socio-historical context, and where emphases on practical learning are connected to narrow industry driven objectives (e.g. workplace integrated learning) or to limited notions of experience that are non-global and ahistorical.

Rectification, Special Period, and Reassessment in Cuba

Economic and political difficulties in Cuba in the 1980s led to the formal *Rectification of errors and negative tendencies* campaign, launched by Castro in 1986. Presented in political and ideological terms, Petras and Morley (1992) argue that the campaign was the result of a "major internal policy debate over how best to confront Cuba's economic stagnation and its hard currency balance-of-payments problem" (p. 16), thus seeing the political and ideological character of the campaign as a way of enhancing public support for such measures. The result was a nation-wide collective reassessment of every aspect of economic and social organization in Cuba, including education. Having drawn earlier on some of the collectivist methods of Soviet education, the *rectification campaign* included a rejection of the Stalinisation of education that evolved through that tradition, which included for example a bureaucratic emphasis on promotion rates, leading to negative pedagogical practices in schools to maintain and improve such rates (see Castro, 1988). In education, the rectification campaign included a critique of the contradictions between the content of what students were receiving in school, and practices outside the school. For example, in a speech to close the Fifth Congress of the UJC in April 1987, Castro stressed the need for cadres and

school teachers to model desired socialist and revolutionary behaviour, morals, attitudes, and the application of Marxism-Leninism, adding:

We might have a teacher teaching Marxism, 400 hours in a semester if you like, and if they are a bad example to their students all the books and the 400 hours of Marxism-Leninism are worthless (in Castro, 1988, p. 138).

It was here that the enduring influence of Che Guevara's ideas was critical, viewing Cuban collectivism in pedagogy not as the collectivism of control (Makarenko, 1955), but rather the collectivism of social action (Guevara, 2003, pp. 212-228). The attempts at reforming education were informed by Guevara's critical emphasis on the importance of individual consciousness and a revolutionary morality as distinct to the development of functional citizens in terms of economic growth. Some of the changes made in this period included criticism of authoritarian classrooms and the formalistic transmission of knowledge, with a renewed "...emphasis on active and participatory learning, to be facilitated with creative teaching methods" (Lutjens, 2000, p. 6); the decentralisation of educational administration, and greater autonomy for schools; and an emphasis on the ideological and political role of education, with more of a focus on Cuban history and civic education. 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 Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and associated trade agreements with the socialist countries (Castro, 1991; Monreal, 2001; Pastor Jr & Zimbalist, 1995b). Between 1989 and 1993 the national economy experienced negative growth, with GNP contracting by some 45% and imports falling by around two-thirds (Carranza-Valdéz, Gutiérrez Urdaneta, & Monreal-González, 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 & Hagelburg, 1994), causing frequent and extended blackouts for much of the population.

In this context education was again subject to critical reassessment as Cuba sought to save its socialist project in the post-Soviet world. The long-standing commitment to universal education was maintained, illustrated by the fact that, during the harshest moments of the

Special Period, educational spending was maintained and then increased (Borotto López, 1999). Debate within Cuba in the mid-1990s highlighted major points of similarity between schooling on the island and in capitalist contexts (see for example Blanco, 1995a; Marí Lois, 1995), with a particular emphasis on its ongoing instrumental character of selecting and preparing students for work/the economy. Marí Lois (1995) for example argued:

To establish the “preparation for work” as 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).

The preparation of labour for the national economy was qualitatively different in the context of socialist Cuba compared with, for example, capitalist Australia, most particularly given the relatively high level of socioeconomic equality. The critique by academics like Marí Lois, however, highlighted the persistence and strength of this instrumental aspect of education, and its capacity to work against students’ political and ideological formation. Moreover, the critique of schooling was linked to a wider 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 Alonso-Tejada, 1995; Juan Antonio Blanco, 1995b; Martínez Heredia, 1995).

Education for 21st century socialism in Venezuela: some early signs

The Venezuelan approach, drawing on concepts of critical and popular education within the framework of a participatory model of endogenous socialist development, connects with the spirit of the Cuban education model, particularly as conceived by Che Guevara. At the forefront is the struggle to translate policy into practice in ways that are authentically democratic, that promote critical reflection and participation over formalistic and uncritical learning of the new hegemony that, as the Soviet experience demonstrates, can function to depoliticise in the name of political formation. Like the Cuban experience, formal school education in Venezuela's Bolivarian Education System is based on an explicit, politicized

conception of education and its role in society. The basic conceptual, philosophical and legal basis of the Bolivarian schools was reported by the then Ministry of Education and Sport as follows:

The school must be a space where the social actors that have formerly been excluded are able to intervene in the social life of citizens, in the construction of a nation built on dialogue and the recognition of the political, social, economic and cultural rights of all. The forms and languages of the majority and the minorities must also be protagonists in the public sphere... The process we are undertaking is the movement from representative democracy to an authentic “participatory-protagonistic democracy; for that it is essential that we talk about action in the recognition and integration of diversity” (Ministerio de Educación y Deportes, 2006, p. 10).

Critical and popular education

The release in 2008 of a draft national curriculum framework for the Bolivarian system took the elaboration of the social and political role of public education for socialism a step further, building on the emphasis on critical and popular education, inspired by the work of Freire (1970), that followed Chávez’s 2006 re-election. In a promising sign of further reforms, the framework foregrounds Che Guevara’s fundamental approach to education in promoting the Bolivarian model of socialism (MPPCI, 2007), noting that the system is “oriented toward the consolidation of a humanistic, democratic, protagonistic, participatory, multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural, pluri-lingual and intercultural society...” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007, p. 11), and critiquing the former system for reinforcing “the fundamental values of the capitalist system: individualism, egotism, intolerance, consumerism and ferocious competition ... [which also] promoted the privatisation of education” (p. 12). The framework was debated in parliament, and at the time of writing was the subject of an ongoing nation-wide consultation process with teachers, parents and communities, before its final draft is prepared.

While goals like those reported above may well be found in educational systems throughout the world, the Bolivarian system consistently refers these back to the underlying project to “promote the formation of new republicans, with creative and transformational autonomy, and with revolutionary ideas; with a positive attitude towards learning in order to put into practice new and original solutions for the endogenous transformation of the social-

community context” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007, p. 16). Moreover, Freirean influences are evident in references to schooling to “form girls and boys with a reflective, critical and independent attitude ... with a consciousness that allows them to understand, confront and verify their reality themselves; who learn from their surroundings, so that they are increasingly participating, protagonistic and co-responsible for their actions in the school, the family and the community” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación 2007, p. 26).

According to the esteemed Venezuelan academic and political activist, Luis Bigott (2009), the expansion of education in Venezuela currently reflects two distinctive tendencies in popular education. The first comes out of 19th century Europe focused on the expansion of access to education, and the other based on 20th century South American critical/liberatory work of Freire and Fals Borda focused on the extension of education for the transformation of society. As documented above, the move toward universal access to State provided education, from childcare to primary and secondary schooling, technical and undergraduate tertiary education, and parallel adult education, has clearly been substantial (Chávez, 2008). In and of itself, in the global neoliberal context this reform program arguably takes on a revolutionary character.

A distinctly Venezuelan version of *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) is still being debated amongst academics and teachers, with some current examples of a working version being drawn upon offering glimpses of its potential. Founded in 2003 as a central feature of attempts to extend access to higher education, the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) offers free places to all students and seeks to fundamentally challenge the elitism of many of the traditional universities. Stating its commitment to social justice and equality at the core of all educational content and delivery, all courses undertaken at the UBV apply a PAR methodology, described as a multidisciplinary approach linking practice and theory.

In practice, the PAR methodology sees UBV students based in their local communities, working alongside a mentor on a community project, this being a core part of their formal studies. Examples include Community Health students working with doctors within the *Barrio Adentro* health mission, or Legal studies students establishing a community legal centre to advise and support families with civil law issues. Similarly, education students work with a teacher/mentor in schools in their local community. In the evenings all UBV students undertake classes in which they discuss theory linking back into and arising from their experiences in the project. The approach is designed to place day-to-day decision-making and problem solving in the hands of local communities, as part of the broader societal

reconstruction underway, with all participants gaining skills through the process. The intent is that the PAR methodology places researchers in positions of political leadership, but with the projects being democratically controlled and driven by the communities themselves and their own leaders, and aimed at realising the objectives of the community based organisations.

The discussion is interesting but of greatest importance is *who* is taking part in this discussion. So much more than social and economic inclusion, this is political inclusion, with educational decision-making in the hands of staff, students, parents and the community.

Conclusion

Significant obstacles, tensions and contradictions remain in Cuba and Venezuela as they seek to define, debate and construct viable models of socialism for the contemporary times, and to develop systems of mass education that might contribute to the formation of citizens required for their respective political projects. In Cuba, for example, the training of new teachers, and retention of existing teachers for such a project remains a major challenge as teachers leave the profession for more highly remunerated work (see for example Espina Prieto 2001; Pérez Izquierdo 1998) in the post-Soviet context. In Venezuela, discussions with education academics and activists conducted by the authors during fieldwork in Caracas in 2007, 2008 and 2009 repeatedly raised the challenge of the political and pedagogical conservatism of existing teachers, who are often in opposition to the government's Bolivarian socialist project (e.g. Griffiths, 2008).

Historically, the expansion of public education has been a common feature of socialist revolutions, overtly presented as addressing legacies of educational inequity and exclusion. Impressive results frequently followed, including resources for new and/or refurbished schools, teachers and teacher training, and consequent increases in the participation rates of school-age children in schooling, as well as systems of parallel adult education for historically marginalised groups. The Cuban and Venezuelan cases reported here align with these general trends. These cases also highlight the many and complex difficulties associated with the overt political function of schooling in such societies: how to direct mass education to the formation of 'new socialist citizens' committed to the transformation of society toward a model of socialism. We refer to 'a' model of socialism, acknowledging the particular impact of the Soviet Union on the Cuban model, and in turn on its educational structures, curricula, and pedagogical practices; and the contrasting lack of clarity in Venezuela about the 'twenty-first

century socialism' and so the types of citizens, and associated educational practices, it requires.

One of the tensions at work in such processes, acknowledged in some of the Cuban research, is the potential for the political formation of students to be reduced to formalistic and uncritical responses to official ideologies that was antithetical to the official socialist objectives. Another, necessarily related, tension is the potential for socialist formation in schooling to be reduced to the functional identification and sorting of students for the requirements of the national economy, albeit with a more equitable allocation in a more equal socioeconomic structure/society. On both of these points, and others, the Venezuelan case holds particular interest given the historical context in which its Bolivarian socialist project is unfolding. The potential to benefit from lessons learned in Cuba, and in other former socialist States, alongside the consistent policy commitments to democratic, participatory socialism, is we think one of the most promising features of Venezuelan process. Progress on this political project, and the associated educational reforms, will therefore be crucial in our endeavours to contribute to more equal, just and democratic societies everywhere.

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Writers' Details

Tom Griffiths teaches at The University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. Jo Williams teaches at the Victoria University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Contact

tom.griffiths@newcastle.edu.au

jo.Williams@vu.edu.au