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CUBA'S SECOND EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTION

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In April 1972 Prime Minister Fidel Castro surprised many when he said that it was "necessary to carry out a real educational revolution" in Cuba. The surprise stemmed from the fact that Cuba had already carried out what, in the eyes of many foreign experts, could only be denominated "revolution in education." Castro, they commented, was talking about a second educational revolution, which like a new stage of a rocket, would propel pedagogy toward new heights.

Before the Cuban revolution, some 85% of the young adults between 15 and 19 years of age were unemployed and not attending school. There were 800,000 children of primary school age who did not attend schools. There were 10,000 teachers unemployed; there were less than a thousand state scholarships distributed, often in exchange for doing a good service to some politician. In the year Fulgencio Batista took power, the national educational budget stood at 70 million pesos, not nearly enough to meet even the minimal needs of educating Cuba's youth.

Today it is a different story. Over 95% of the children between 6 and 12 are enrolled in primary schools. Adolescents and young adults have an open-ended opportunity to work, study or do both. Instead of unemployment there is a serious teacher shortage. Some 107,000 state scholarships that include education, board, clothing and school materials are being offered for the course beginning in September 1973.

The school budget for the present year surpassed 700 million pesos. It has been estimated that one out of every three persons in Cuba is studying either fulltime or part time.

There has been over the years a veritable beehive of educational activities extending into every nook and cranny of the nation. All these things have added up in the minds of knowledgeable observers, to a revolution in education. The struggle out of underdevelopment, however, has not been easy sledding. Despite gigantic efforts and impressive achievements, the past with its illiteracy, low cultural level and paucity of educators has acted as a deterrent to Cuba's tremendously ambitious plans. Cubans are determined to overcome the problems and push on. It is in this context that Fidel Castro's call for a "real educational revolution" must be placed.

What are the major problems faced by Cuban educators? One of them, an international problem, is that of dropouts. The following statistics give insights into the great achievements of education and, on the other hand, the dropout porblem. The chart indicates the percentage of young people according to age enrolled in schools during the 1971/72 school year:

<u>AGE</u>	<u>ATTENDING SCHOOL</u>
8	99.8
10	97.6
12	94.6
13	86.9
14	76.7
15	55.7
16	39.8

These statistics demonstrate that beginning with the age of thirteen, there is a sharp rise in school dropouts. The total number of 13 to 16 year olds who did not study and (for the most part) did not work totalled more than 200,000.

The dropout problem is also highlighted by a comparison of the number of students who begin a given level of schooling with the number who follow through and graduate.

Of the 387,000 children who enrolled in first grade in the 1965/66 school year, 124,000 got to sixth grade and only 82,300 (21.2% of the original enrollment) passed the sixth grade course. A similar situation existed in junior high. Of the 59,000 youngsters who enrolled in the 1966/67 course, 17,213 reached tenth grade and of those only 8073 (13.6%) passed the course.

The problem of the repeating students was a direct result of the average 70% promotion rate in Cuban schools. In the 1971/72 school year there were more than 700,000 primary and junior high students that were two or more years behind their normal school-age level due to multiple repetition.

Thousands of youth who leave school before finishing their secondary schooling were siphoned off into teacher training courses but the great majority of dropouts neither worked nor studied, a fact which clashed head on with the new work and study ethic predicated by the Cuban revolution and its leaders.

The dropout rate had its direct repercussions in the relatively low number of students that entered the regular and technological high schools over the sixties. There were other reasons, however. Because of a lack of guidance toward the technological subjects, both industrial and agricultural, many of the students opted for study in fields like language. In 1971/72 there were about 24,000 students enrolled in language schools (for translators, interpreters, teachers) and approximately the same number enrolled in the secondary level technological-profession industrial high schools and agricultural schools. This phenomenon led Castro to ask: "Who is going to produce the material goods in the future? How are we going to technify industry and agriculture?"

In his analysis of the problems facing Cuban education, the Prime Minister put the question: "What are the factors that determine these deficiencies?" The list he gave was long: lack of material resources and school buildings; the inadequacy of the isolated rural schools; the low general cultural level of the population with a widespread underestimation of the need for education. Castro also placed part of the responsibility on the deficient teaching skills of a portion of Cuba's primary and secondary school teachers.

The improvement of teaching skills has, since the beginning of the revolution, been a priority item of the Ministry of Education. Over the years all teachers, most of them without previous experience, have been required to take training courses during one school day a week, in addition to the more prolonged summer courses. In that way the school system went a long way toward solving its problem. But the growth of student enrollment has been so explosive that the problem of teacher quality hasn't been able to catch up. Thus, in only 1972, of the 79,968 primary and secondary school teachers of the nation, only 38.7% in primary education and 26.3% in secondary education had teaching diplomas.

The teacher shortage is the result of the dramatic growth rate of Cuban education, a problem of dynamic development in an underdeveloped country. When Castro spoke in 1972 he projected a secondary-school teacher shortage of some 18,000 by 1976 if something drastic and revolutionary was not done.

The problems of dropouts, repeaters, teaching skills, teacher shortage and vocational priorities were all exposed to public view by the Cuban leadership. This was, in fact, part of the strategy used by the revolution to overcome many of its problems in the past. It was the "mass-line" in action, the same "mass-line" used when Fidel Castro took the nation's economic problems to the people in 1970. The purpose was to make the people conscious of the critical problems facing the nation and, as a result, stimulate their reserves of energy, determination and creativity. In both the economic and educational spheres adequate policy decisions plus the mass-line have opened the way for the solution of Cuba's major problem during the decade of the seventies.

Perhaps the most dramatic initiative, that which has captured the imagination of both Cubans and foreign visitors, is the School in the Countryside plan. These schools, surrounded by large-scale farms, combine a curriculum of study, work and recreation. The daily stint in the fields during the school week is limited to three hours. The course of study is that of the urban junior highs. All the schools are new and built on a standard ultra-modern model for boarding five hundred students.

The schools have well equipped laboratories, the latest in audio-visual aids, sports fields, assembly halls and even, in some, olympic size swimming pools.

The Cubans are building the new schools with startling speed. The first one in Artemisa was inaugurated at the beginning of this decade. In May 1973 there were 52 in operation. When the September 1973 course begins there will be around 90. Some 46,000 scholarships for these schools have been offered for the September course. By the end of the decade, the plan is to have Schools in the Countryside for a half million students, that is, there will be one thousand schools.

What are the economics of the Schools in the Countryside? How can Cuba afford to give such lavish education to its young people? In 1972, at the inauguration of one of the new schools near Havana, I heard Fidel Castro answer these two questions put to him by a skeptical European journalist. Castro said in effect that the Schools in the Countryside would pay for themselves and rattled off statistics to prove that the citrus and other agricultural products cared for and harvested by the students would bring in foreign currency surpassing the outlay. He affirmed that the new and revolutionary schools were the only way that Cuba could fulfill its aspiration of adequately educating its young. I saw the same newsman in June 1973. He had just come back from a visit to one of the Schools in the Ceiba agricultural plan, only an hour's drive from the capital. He was much less skeptical than the year before. "If this works", he said, "it will be the answer to the Third World's educational problem, those nations that until now have not been able to afford to educate all their youth."

The schools are normally built in clusters around a given agricultural plan. The Isle of Pines is an example. The Isle, sparsely populated, will become one of the country's largest citrus fruit producers over the next decade. This would be impossible without the injection of young students to work in the groves. In May 1973 there were already eight Schools in the Countryside on the Isle. By the end of the year there will be thirteen; by 1980 there will be seventy five.

If everything works out the way it is planned the students will be helping in a very substantial way to ease Cuba's balance of payment problem by the end of the decade. Just as important from the Cuban point of view, they will be receiving a good education, learning the importance of socially useful work and will grow into young adulthood, strong and healthy in mind and body.

Cuban pedagogues are delighted with the first results of the Schools in the Countryside. Dropouts have fallen to only a negligible percent, and promotion has leaped to over 90 percent, compared with the average 70 percent figure in the regular urban junior highs. The results, they say, are a logical outcome of the ideal conditions created for the young people, the energizing effects of the physical work, the collective atmosphere of study and achievement and a general motivation seldom found in other kinds of schools.

The investment in the School in the Countryside plan has been necessarily high. According to informed sources, the school budget rose from something over 400 million pesos in the 1971/1972 fiscal year to over 700 million pesos(dollars) in the present year. Cuban educators will tell you that this investment will pay for itself not only in terms of the production but also as regards the formation of a cultured and technologically conscious generation that will guarantee Cuba's progress out of underdevelopment in the future.

The teacher shortage presents a major challenge. The government has stepped up its efforts to channel young people towards teaching careers. In September 1973, 16,700 of the total 107,000 scholarships will go to teacher training courses.

In addition, the government has put into practice a number of motivating devices that will encourage young people to choose teaching careers. For instance, in the spring of 1973 there were some 66,000 fifth and sixth grade students who had already joined the "Teaching Guerrilla" movement. These young people signed up voluntarily in the movement and have shown interest in entering the Primary Teacher Training Schools upon graduation from primary school.

The problem of providing teachers for the vast expansion of Schools in the Countryside will also be solved through a mass student movement called "Pedagogical Detachment Manuel Ascunce" (Ascunce was a young literacy campaign worker murdered by counter-revolutionaries in 1961). The initiative for the organization of this movement came out of a 1972 meeting between Fidel Castro and students of the Ceiba Secondary Schools in the Countryside in April 1972. At that time 89 tenth grade students announced that they would like to enroll in the Pedagogical Institute of the University of Havana and, at the same time, give classes in the Ceiba school. The idea was for them to continue to live at the Ceiba school and take their university classes through visiting teachers and summer courses. Their course would last five years, three of them general studies and two of them specialized in a particular subject. On graduation they would receive credentials as junior and senior high teachers. In preparation for their newly chosen career they created "Circles of Pedagogical Initiation" for tenth graders.

Within a year 4500 tenth graders in the nation had signed up as part of the Pedagogical Detachment. It is estimated that within a decade this plan of teach and study will give the nation 30,000 secondary school teachers, averaging 25 years of age.

Still another initiative was the organization of "Combatants of the Technical Revolution" among secondary school students. Like the Pedagogical Detachment, this movement has the purpose of channeling students towards priority careers. By the end of spring 1973 some 26,000 students had become members of the Combatants and had pledged themselves to study technological and scientific subjects upon graduation. The number of scholarships for September 1973 reflects the interest of the government in encouraging studies in these careers: 12,300 scholarships for study in polytechnical high schools, 5753 for agricultural schools and 9419 for so-called industrial schools. This means that almost one quarter of the scholarships offered for the coming school year will go to secondary level studies in technical and agricultural subjects.

Concrete plans have also been made for bringing the present school dropouts who do not work into the mainstream. Jorge Risquet, then Minister of Labor (he is now a member of the Secretariat of the Communist Party) emphasized the importance of this endeavor when he affirmed that "school dropout is the principal source of deformation of our youth today."

Two organizations, the Centennial Youth Column and the Army, have had great success in directing the young dropouts toward socially useful work and at the same time giving them an education. It will be on the basis of their experiences that new plans for the dropouts will be drafted.

The Centennial Youth Column was organized in 1968 with an eye to the 10-million-ton 1970 sugar harvest. Most of the young people who volunteered were precisely those who had dropped out of primary school. The members of the Column worked, studied and fulfilled their military service commitments. The number of Columnists rose from some 40,000 in 1970 to 70,000 in 1973.

The army had a similar institution: Permanent Infantry Divisions, which in 1973 had more than 40,000 youth in its ranks, working and studying.

In August, it has been announced, a new organization that will supplant the other two, the Youth Labor Army, will be founded. The proposed law which will create this Army is now being studied and will be sent to mass organizations, schools and work centers for open discussion.

The new law will institutionalize the obligation of all youth who are not working, or studying in regular schools or serving in the armed forces, to do service in "the trenches of production... in those places and spheres of the economy where it is most necessary." (Isidoro Malmierca, Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party).

The Youth Labor Army like the Schools in the Countryside is part of the effort to instill the ethic of work and study in all Cuban youth.

In his defense speech following the attack against the Moncada Barracks in 1953, twenty-five year old Fidel Castro noted that "The little rural schools are attended by only half the school-age children-barefoot, half-naked, and undernourished and frequently the teacher must buy necessary materials from his own salary." There is no doubt that the Cuban revolution has changed all that.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- 1.- Today Cuba has modern schools.
- 2.- The Cuban prime minister announcing the new educational plan.

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