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## ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

### ASPECTS OF LIFE IN MODERN CUBA

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#### THE CUBAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Fidel Castro has remarked that the whole of Cuba is a school. The statistics seem to support his assertion: in September 1976 3,320,000 students, adults as well as school children, were enrolled in courses of one kind or another. This figure represents over a third of the total population. In fact, so many people are studying in their spare time to continue their education that, coupled with the rise in population, schools and universities are bursting at the seams making necessary the continuation of school building at a high level and greater selectivity. Education has long been a priority of the Revolutionary Government. In 1953, at the time of his trial, after the abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago De Cuba, Fidel Castro committed a revolutionary government to the complete reform of the education system making it relate to the economic and social needs of the country. Later, in the Sierra Maestra, the guerrillas worked among the local peasant farmers teaching them basic literary skills.

As soon as the Rebel Army — led by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos — took power in 1959 the barracks of the deposed President, Batista, were converted into schools and the ministry of Education purged of sinecures. Planning began immediately to rid the country of illiteracy, a necessary act if the development plans of the new government were to be realised, first in the Ministry then in a separate Literary Commission. In September 1960 planning had reached the point where Fidel Castro could announce to the world at the United Nations in New York, that the Cuban people would, in the next year, get rid of illiteracy once and for all.

All the political parties, trade unions, teachers and the army were involved. Books were written and printed for the Campaign. 1961 was designated the *Year of Education* with the elimination of illiteracy the main objective. A census was taken to locate and identify all those people who could not read and write and volunteers recruited in the towns to teach in their spare time. "If you know, teach; if you don't know, learn." became the rallying cry. Students volunteered from schools and when it was seen how great was their contribution all schools were closed from April to allow more students and all teachers to participate.

It was not easy for city-born students used to the comforts of urban life to leave that behind and share the lot of poor peasant families. Many students claimed to have learned more from the experience than the people they taught. By making the young, predominantly urban, population aware of the tasks facing the Cuban people and uniting the town and country, the Literacy Campaign made a significant contribution to development.

The whole country was involved one way or another with the Campaign; television, radio and the press carried daily progress reports with Fidel Castro himself playing a leading part in the organisation. By the end of the year the objective had been fulfilled and Cuba could declare itself a *Land Free of Illiteracy*. But the Campaign was a beginning, not an end in itself. All the barriers and resistances to adult education had been smashed and follow-up courses could now build on the basic skills that had been taught. Programmes began in factories and workshops; "Worker/Peasant Faculties" were established to enable workers to continue their education through elementary school to higher levels.

New schools were built, private schools taken into the State system, and large houses converted into schools. More and more Cuban children began to attend school and complete their education.

Technical and higher education developed at the same rapid pace. Technical schools and colleges were developed and the universities began to reflect the economic and social needs of the country; more doctors and dentists, more technicians and vets were produced. Throughout the 1960s Education was concerned with the extension of education to all. At the end of the 60s an experiment was tried that was to change the whole shape of education. Students were taken to the country where for 45 days they lived in tents combining study with agricultural work. This scheme was so successful that from then on all secondary students spent some time in the country living and working. The School to the Country became The School in the Country, permanent coed. boarding schools that have become the model for secondary education in Cuba. Students live from Sunday through to Saturday at school returning to their families at weekends. While at school, in addition to their regular studies, all students contribute to the running of the school and spend half of each day working in the fields or in some other form of work. In this way students are producers as well as consumers and the distance between manual and mental work is eroded so easing the economic burden of mass education and contributing to the formation of the New Cuban Man and Woman.

Whilst this kind of school remains the model for secondary education in Cuba, Fidel Castro pointed out in September 1976 that demand outstrips supply. Despite a massive building programme there are not enough of these kind of schools to go round so, in the meantime, schools will be erected in towns with more temporary schools in the countryside. Greater selectivity will decide which students will continue in higher education.

The education system of Cuba is one of the great successes of the Revolution alongside health and the provision of social services. Cuban successes in getting rid of illiteracy, developing nursery education, providing elementary and secondary education for all, as well as the adult, and levels of education would not disgrace a developed country. In a developing country with Cuba's limited resources the achievement is all the more remarkable.

1 "THE BATTLE FOR THE SIXTH GRADE: EVERYONE'S TASK". This street poster makes clear the task that has been set in Cuba; to raise the level of the entire population to 6th Grade — the equivalent to Junior level in the British system — by 1980. In 1976, 140 thousand workers reached this grade by studying part-time.

ADULT EDUCATION. A typical adult class; these women attend during the day. Classes are provided at all levels; this one is for Elementary grade.

- 3 THE 1961 LITERACY CAMPAIGN. These young volunteers are part of the *Conrado Benitez Brigade* that went into the interior to teach poor peasant families how to read and write.
- 4 CIRCULOS INFANTILES. These Pre-School nurseries are a product of the revolution. In themselves they have transformed the lives of many women now able to go out to work.
- 5 WORK AND STUDY. All students in Cuba, at whatever level, combine work with study. This may consist of cleaning or maintaining school buildings and equipment or productive work in agriculture, as for these students who are cleaning their clothes after a morning's work.
- 6 Other students, like these at the Lenin Vocational School, manufacture radios — seen here — or assemble circuits for the range of computers made in Cuba.
- 7 SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTRY. The model for Secondary Education are these coed. boarding schools. Uniforms, books, meals and all equipment are provided free.
- 8 Not all students go to the model schools. This one is in the centre of Havana and was a private school before the revolution.
- 9 THE NEW MEN AND WOMEN. In addition to their study and work, students have a political responsibility. They are involved in decision making in their schools through Schools Councils and organisations like the Secondary School Student Federation (FEEM) that exist in each school. These students are forming a guard of honour to commemorate those who died at the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.
- 10 SPORT is an important part of the school curriculum. Every student — like these at the Salvador Allende Teacher Training school — have sports activities every day. Schools facilities are used by the local population at weekends and vacation times.
- 11 ART EDUCATION is the responsibility of the National Council of Culture. Students from Art Schools go to Schools in the Country for productive work. While there, they teach a range of artistic skills.
- 12 HIGHER EDUCATION. The Humanities are taught at University but priority is given to scientific and technological subjects important development needs of the country.

*Suggested Reading:*

"Cuba's Educational Revolution". Arthur Gillette. Fabian 1973.

"Education in the Cuban Revolution". John Griffiths & Douglas Holly. Writers & Readers 1977.

"Dear Comrade, I used to be illiterate" : the Literacy Campaign in Cuba. John Griffiths. Writers & Readers 1977.

"The Children are the Revolution". Marvin Leiner. Viking 1972.

"Cuba for Beginners" Rius. Writers & Readers 1975.

Series compiled by: JOHN GRIFFITHS

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