

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION - The Cuban Experience

by Margo Kirk, MA(CYS)

“Nothing is more important than a child”

This slogan can be seen displayed on government billboards throughout Cuba. Therefore, it begs the question: What has the government of revolutionary Cuba done to support this basic philosophical statement, specifically in the context of early childhood education? The simple answer is: “A lot”. In recent years, even representatives of international organizations such as the World Bank, a conservative organization whose policies are fundamentally opposite to those in Cuba, have spoken favourably about the Cuban system and referred in positive terms to its comprehensive early childhood program (Gasperini, 2000).

Despite limited finances and other pressing social needs, a national early childhood education system has indeed evolved since 1959 when Fidel Castro gained power. No such system has developed in Canada even though ostensibly, as a “developed nation,” more financial resources are available and several governments have, in fact, promised such a model. So what does Cuba have that Canada does not? Perhaps, the unique nature of the Cuban system (that is, a co-ordinated balance between formal and non-formal education) stems from the fact that there was a very specific and well-defined starting point. Be that as it may, four other main criteria exemplify the Cuban experience:

1. Political longevity and commitment.
2. A strong conviction in the right to education as a life-long process
3. Major community involvement.
4. Clarity in goals.

1. Political longevity and commitment.

Firstly, political longevity, commitment, as well as consistency have obviously supported a stable framework. Since 1959, a very high value has consistently been placed on the development of human resources, and education in particular was seen as a facilitator in the goal to increase quality of life, by what ever means that “quality” may be defined. Children have become one of the main beneficiaries of these policies.

2. A strong conviction in the right to education as a life-long process

Secondly, since the early years of the revolution, Fidel Castro has maintained the strong conviction that education is a basic human right and learning is recognized as a lifelong process, starting at birth. At first, child care may have been viewed by the government as merely a requirement in order to enable women to study and work. However, the intrinsic value of early childhood education was quickly added to the strategic plan and since 1980, it has been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. It is not a service to be purchased by a parent, but rather part of a “lifelong learning” strategy promoting health and well-being. Needless to say there are no privately run centres in Cuba. Unlike in Canada, where “by and large, child ‘care’ while mothers work, and ‘education’ to develop the child remain separate domains” (CRRU, 2002), Cuba has re-structured this thinking. Clearly, the overall goal is universal early childhood education and child “care” is seen merely as one means to deliver it.

3. Major community involvement.

Thirdly, the role of the mass organization, Federation of Cuban Woman (FMC), an organization to which the vast majority of women belong, can not be underestimated. The FMC aggressively took on the challenge of developing a national child care system by mobilizing the community and promoting the value of learning as well as community responsibility. Indeed, the concept of “It takes a village to raise a child” has most effectively and efficiently been put into practice. With the FMC at the helm, the co-ordination of efforts and responsibilities among health care professionals, government ministries, unions, and community groups together with families and early childhood educators became well defined and effective. Partnership and shared responsibility continues to be stressed.

4. Clarity in goals.

Finally, much can be said for clarity. Cuba has two, and only two, well-established national options, the formal and non-formal systems, which together have the capacity of reaching 98% of children under that age of six, regardless of wealth, or geographic location.

The Formal Child Care System-Children's Circles

The formal system of child care centres (the *circulos infantiles* or children's circles), available to working mothers only, has been continually "professionalizing" since its inception in 1960. Since the formation of the Instituto de la Infancia (Children's Institute) in 1971 (absorbed into the Ministry of Education in 1980), research and professional development as well as clearly defined roles, responsibilities and expectations for all stakeholders have been articulated. Post-secondary education is required for teaching staff and ongoing professional development or continued education remains the norm. In 1995, the Latin-American Centre for the Study of Preschool Education (CELEP) was established in Havana with quality assurance, program monitoring and ongoing research and investigation in the field as significant aspects of its mandate. Although, initially, the philosophy of education largely mirrored that of the Soviet Union, a model more in keeping with Cuban values and culture did emerge as educators recognized the need for each child to develop a strong emotional base. The standard (national) curriculum began to reflect a more "child-centred" philosophy where children were increasingly seen as individuals as well as members of a group.

Detailed records are kept on each child and the frequent parent/ teacher meetings and/or home visits help to strengthen communication as well as illustrate the philosophy of joint responsibility (Nunez Argon, 2002). The director is charged with focussing her attention on the management of the centre and evaluating programs (a very detailed and comprehensive process). Indeed, the role of the director has been articulated in very precise terms. Her primary functions include promoting educational values (in teachers, children and parents), supervising staff and team-building (Instituto de la Infancia, 1977). An office administrator may be on staff to handle the "business-type" paperwork. On-site medical staff (a doctor and nurse) oversees the development and day-to-day health of the children from a medical perspective. This includes a set rigorous, regularly scheduled check-ups at the centre, a process which illustrates the emphasis on preventative health care, so common in Cuba.

In addition, the roles of the centre's kitchen and housekeeping (cleaning) staff are clearly spelled out.

In the *circulo infantil*, weekly schedules are unique for each age group and according to the 22-article *Reglamento escolar* (school regulations), should be "strictly adhered to" (Artículo 2). The "educational" components of the daily routine are formatted around specific elements of the curriculum. Subject areas such as language development, art education, music education, and knowledge of the world which may include the social world, natural world, objects and their properties, math concepts, construction, special and temporal relations and/or the development of the senses are included. As well, again in keeping with the Cuban emphasis on preventative medicare, young children up to and including the age of 2 years of age receive a daily bath.

It is interesting to note that since understanding the child and how the child learns is paramount to the process of early childhood education, researchers in Cuba have proposed that the teacher and the assistants move with the child (Echegoy Zapata, 1998). (Here, it should be clarified that although open year-round, the *circulo's* "school year" follows that of the Primary school, beginning in September, when the children are placed in the appropriate age group. These groups remain in place until the following June). In addition, the philosophy of "lifelong learning" as a process is further demonstrated. Prior to a child making the move to Primary school, there is a significant exchange of information, including on-site (*circulo*) visits and discussions with the Primary Grade teacher (Franco Garcia, 2002).

The Informal Child Care System

Cuban educators view early childhood as a crucial period when some 75% of the child's values are formed. Therefore, since the formal *circulos infantiles* alone could not meet the educational needs of all children, alternatives were sought and a mechanism to deliver early childhood education through alternate (non-formal) channels was developed. In 1992, with support from UNICEF, a national non-formal early childhood education system called "Educa a tu hijo" was inaugurated. The program, as originally conceived,

was to “support the education of children in their own home, together with the advice and support of qualified personnel, and with broad community support” (Perez Valdez & Perez Travieso, 1995, p.5). Therefore, with its base as the family, the “Educa a tu hijo” program called upon the local *circulo infantil* as well as the community at large to participate. This program is now internationally recognized as innovative and effective (UNICEF, 2001).

For parents, the nine-pamphlet series in the “Educa a tu hijo” program clearly and concisely addresses the standard developmental expectations for a child (birth to six years) and the active role parents play in the process. In a warm, friendly manner, the parents (both ‘mom’ and ‘dad’) continue to be drawn into the process and the user-friendly format (including illustrations) indeed contains a vast amount of pertinent material. The engaging tone throughout the booklets is not at all cold or formal and although the emotional development of a child is undoubtedly of paramount importance, these booklets are unquestionably educating parents about all aspects of their child’s development, their health and safety.

In addition, the non-formal system includes a weekly children’s television program aired nationwide on the country’s educational channel. Trained volunteers and educators also promote active participation in a variety of community-based activities and home visits for children under two years of age provide additional support to families. In sum, the “Educa a tu hijo” program relies on resources and participation from the home environment, the community at large and the *circulo*, and research has demonstrated that it is valued as a credible form of early childhood education (see Perez Valdes, M. & Perez Travieso, I., 1995, & UNICEF, 2001).

In short, Cuba has been pro-active in developing comprehensive, long-term strategic plans for policy development and implementation in the field of early childhood education that is clearly placed in the public domain. It is also a respected and highly valued component, thereof. Indeed, the formal approach which includes over 1,100 *circulos infantiles* serving approximately 20% of children under 6 years of age and the non-formal program

of “Educa a tu hijo” form two very effective delivery mechanisms for the education of young children.

In a recent report, Campaign 2000 (2002) commented that “Canada is a country where the diversity of its regions is celebrated” (p.1), but then added “when the focus is on early childhood education, disparity, the less attractive cousin of diversity, is frequently uncovered” (p.1). Perhaps as Cuba has done, Canada should refocus and give credence to a legitimate place for the rights of the child in the “lifelong process” of learning where “Nothing is more important than a child”.

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