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Comprehensive Education Bolivarian-style: the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Venezuela[1]

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author traces revolutionary developments in an alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, a school that caters for students between 4 and 14. He begins by recounting some fieldwork done at the school on his behalf by Edward Ellis in 2010. He goes on to discuss a video made at the school by the children in 2011. He concludes by updating Ellis's fieldwork. This consists of an interview in 2012 with the school's co-founder, Miguel Cortez, also carried out by Ellis.

Introduction

The misiones (a series of social justice, social welfare, health, anti- poverty and educational programs that have massively reduced poverty, improved health and greatly increased educational opportunities), enacted under the Chávez governments and continuing under President Maduro, are essentially *social democratic* in nature in the sense that they exist in a society that is still a capitalist one. However, they need to be contextualised in the overall Bolivarian project of twenty-first-century socialism, with its promotion of participatory democracy and communal ways of decision-making and living (Cole, 2014b). The same line of argument can be applied to Venezuelan alternative schools. In themselves, alternative schools in Venezuela seem very similar to schools associated with the 'free school movement' in the UK (e.g. Neill, 1960) and to some of the progressive practices enacted under the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) which either took place in schools as a whole, or within specific units within a school – I worked in the latter scenario in the early 1970s.

While there were undoubtedly socialist teachers promoting socialism in UK schools in the 1960s and 1970s, the schools existed under Labour or

Conservative governments which were unequivocally committed to various models of capitalism (there were, however, a number of revolutionary socialists who were members of the Labour Party). In contemporary Venezuela, on the other hand, both mainstream and alternative schools operate under the auspices of a state, which, although it contains a mix of bureaucrats and opportunists as well as revolutionary socialists, is a state that is committed to socialist transformation (see Cole, 2014b). This is the crucial difference between the two models. Moreover, whereas in the UK the schools were under varying degrees of assault by the state (Margaret Thatcher abolished ILEA in 1990), in Venezuela the alternative schools have a chance of being adopted as mainstream models of practice, and of continuing to be part of a revolutionary process. This is extremely important given that, although the state is promoting revolutionary socialism throughout the education system, many schools and universities remain traditional in both form and content (Griffiths & Williams, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Griffiths, 2013; see also Cole, 2014b).

Myriam Anzola identifies some of the obstacles to a national system of alternative education. These include the training of teachers in traditional universities which 'promotes competition and personal success based on a misunderstood meritocracy, the administrative system of primary education which is bureaucratised and sectioned into grades ... a pre-established and dogmatised curriculum, and lastly, families which hope to see their children do better than their companions, without worrying what they learn' (Anzola & Pearson, 2013).

Anzola defines Venezuela's alternative schools as 'informal educative spaces that are guided by the national Bolivarian curriculum, but apply it with a more open and flexible methodology, without prerequisites or ranking students, and allowing them to advance at their own speed' (Anzola & Pearson, 2013).

Pueblo Neuvo 2010

In this article, I focus on the school in Barrio Pueblo Neuvo, Mérida. The Alternative School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development 'promotes an awareness of community surroundings and develops means of social integration in the children' (Anzola & Pearson, 2013). Elsewhere Anzola has stated the reason for the other part of the name of the school:

> Since in the activities that they were doing there were many things that had to do with communication, and the radio is here, and also they like theatre, dance and other activities that had to do with communication, we thought we could call it the 'Alternative School for Communicational Development'. (Soundtrack to Fundacíon CAYAPA, 2011)

Creating Space

The school is a small project, started about five years ago by committed socialist revolutionary residents and activists of Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, perhaps the poorest community in the city of Mérida in western Venezuela. It caters to students aged between 4 and 14. The teachers (known as 'cooperative educational facilitators') want to create an alternative for young people who have been left behind in the state school system and re-engage them in participatory pedagogy consistent with socialist and democratic values. The school is linked to the Ministry of Education under the title of 'alternative school' and receives some state funding.

Reflecting on the overall context of his fieldwork at the school, Edward Ellis (2010) points out that the fact that the school is the exception rather than the rule as far as education in the country as a whole is concerned 'need not be understood as distressing. It can be seen ... as a great opportunity to empower and encourage new forms of change.' He underlines the spaces that the Chávez government opened up – in this case for 'independent and autonomous ... new projects to grow and develop'. Recalling the pre-Chávez years, Gerardo, a part-time collaborator at the school and a long-time community activist from the barrio, states that in those days 'this wouldn't have been possible. This would have been called "terrorist" and would have to be underground.' As he puts it, revolutionary teachers, unlike before, can advance faster, no longer having 'to worry about being hunted down' (Ellis, 2010).

Twenty-first-century Socialist Praxis

Gerardo is committed to socialist praxis, noting that 'socialism is done, not decreed'. Given that the words 'revolution' and 'socialism' are omnipresent in Venezuelan society, and can be used 'without much thought', Gerardo is working on the *construction* of socialism in the school. As he explains, 'here we practice socialism with concrete elements from everyday life ... sharing, working in a collective way, friendship, getting along, the fundamental bases of socialism with praxis'. Having seen societies torn apart in a capitalist system based on consumption, and underlining twenty-first-century socialism's stress on participatory democracy, Gerardo notes that the teachers are trying to teach the children to be 'critical and proactive' – 'not just criticism but how things can be changed', 'we are trying to show that the children have a participatory role in society, and that this role can be transformative'. Communication tools are crucial in this process – 'the radio, the television, the written word ... these things can lead to the transformation of society' (Ellis, 2010).

Lisbeida Rangel, a dance teacher ('dance' being, of course, one of the ways the school students are encouraged to communicate), says of twenty-first-century socialism that it

> is being redefined, something that is flexible. I believe there are new understandings of what socialism is and how it can be implemented.

> ... But basically, the core concepts are the same: equality, social justice, elimination of class differences, more horizontal processes, all of this inside our school is an intrinsic part of what we are doing. It's our base ... So we are trying to transmit these values of equality, solidarity, cooperation, collective work. (Ellis, 2010)

Communal, Cooperative and Democratic Living and Learning

At the Alternative School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development, each day starts with a communal breakfast, after which students are brought together to discuss what will take place that day. Sometimes communal cleaning of the community centre where the classes are held ensues; sometimes the day starts with group activities, focused on reading, writing or mathematics, depending on what students wish to work on, or need to improve.

Gerardo points to the use of a pedagogy that 'involves the children in collective work and thinking' and includes cooperative games. When the teachers meet with the children, as Jeaneth Lopez explains, the teachers try to emphasise 'that we are a collective and if something happens to the group it affects us all' (Ellis, 2010).

Learning at the school is also in line with Freire's advocacy of 'dialogic education', which entails a democratic learning environment and the *absence* of authoritarianism, of 'banking education' (where teachers deposit 'facts' into empty minds) and of grades (Freire, 1993).

Tamara Pearson, a writer for the online magazine venezuelanalysis.com, and also a volunteer teacher of reading at the school points out that

> no one is forced to do anything and there are no punishments. If they don't want to participate in an activity, they can simply go somewhere else, or sit and watch. Hence, the weight is on the teacher to properly motivate the students and draw them in through the activity rather than discipline and threats of lower grades or whatever.

'There is no grading or competition,' Pearson explains, 'there's simply no sense of them competing with others.'

Socialism and the Community

As Edward Ellis states, 'there is a real emphasis on trying to increase students' participation in all activities'. He gives the example of how 'the students watched a movie and then discussed how to organize a screening of that same film in their community. A group conversation was held to identify what the steps necessary would be to put on this screening.' As Ellis explains, 'there is a lot of collaboration on the part of the community and different activities are led by different folks ... It is quite common for the students to leave the classroom to attend an event in the community' (Ellis, 2010). In addition, as Lisbeida

points out, the school's 'activities [are] open to the entire community so that the community is a protagonist in what happens in the school. In that way, the dance group which is part of the school is also part of the community' (Ellis, 2010).

This is not to glamorise the students' community. As Gerardo explains, some of the students come from homes where there are problems of violence, alcohol or drugs, or unemployment and its attendant problems. However, as Lisbeida believes, this can also be a source of strength for the students:

> As these students come from backgrounds that are very difficult, I think that this gives them the ability to see certain social realities with more clarity: justice, the marked differences between violence and love. I see this as a potential to create criticisms and questions with more meaning. Because they have experienced very difficult things, they are not going to be afraid and they are going to have a very strong base to be critical of things. (Ellis, 2010)

In addition, the teachers are trying to improve human relations, not only with cooperative games, from which the teachers are also learning, but also through physical spaces 'with a community vision', such as a community library and a community radio station. As Lisbeida points out:

> We've noticed that the children are arriving at their house with new attitudes, and although we don't have a way to scientifically measure it, we can feel a difference in the attitude of the parents as well ... how they treat their children. Something very interesting is happening. Things are changing ... [the children] learn things based on what they already know and live. In this way, they can also learn that they have the potential to change the reality that surrounds them. (Ellis, 2010)

The students at the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo are in a process of self-liberation. As Lisbeida puts it, 'one of the things that we have seen with this process in the school is that the ones who were thought to be completely without potential or capacity to learn are making people turn their heads. They are doing some incredible things' (video). As Gerardo concludes:

> I have noticed a change in the way the children see things. Before, their world was just the barrio, but now they are looking a little bit beyond this. And I have seen that the children are speaking now, they are conversing ... Before everything was resolved through violence. Now there is more talking. There are still some very sharp words, but we are working on it. This has opened many doors for people. There are a lot of expectations ... And there are many things that we have learned about ourselves due to the students.

Thus, in launching the school and in teaching there, the teachers are learning too. Suggett concludes that this empowerment arises from the challenge of

teaching the students in the school every day. As he puts it, 'the revolution is there in what they're doing and in their transformation process'.

Pueblo Nuevo 2011

Communication and Play: the students speak

In the video made by some of the students at the Alternative School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development (Fundación CAYAPA, 2011), many of them emphasise how the freedom to communicate and the promotion of 'play' aids the learning process. As Carlos Sosa López puts it:

> I feel like in this school I have learned in a freer way, with group work. In other schools you were always really quiet because the teacher didn't let you speak, because we had to do whatever they said, we couldn't do anything else. The teachers give us the opportunity to talk with them and to express ourselves, what we want to do, how we feel ... here you learn more than in other schools. Even though you hear people say, 'no, in that school they don't learn anything because the children spend all day playing', but when we play, we're learning new things. (Video)

Responding in a similar vein, when asked whether she likes the school Hellen Contreras replies:

> Yes! ... I like it because there are more playmates here. Because here they give us the freedom that they didn't give us in the regular school, because here they don't scold you and make you copy from the blackboard like they did every single day. (Video)

Further underlining the authoritarian and didactic methods of the traditional schools, Hellen notes that 'they just say, "Repeat this! Repeat that!" And Jeaneth taught me a way that I don't have to repeat, I just use my fingers.'

> Emmanuel Sánchez also recognises the connection between enjoyment and learning, stating that 'it's fun, you love it, playing, doing assignments ... all of that', while Ruby Contreras, also showing awareness of the ways in which various forms of communication and play all aid in the learning process, and therefore perceiving no need to make a distinction between assignments, play and dance, comments that 'here what they teach me is to do assignments. I like this school a lot because they let us play here and we can dance here too. We study for a while and then we can go to recess.' (Video)

Carlos Sosa López widens the discussion to encompass further aspects of play and communication and the positive effect it has had on him:

> I used to be very quiet, very lonely, I was bored all the time because I had gotten used to copying into a notebook and not going out and playing. Not anymore, now I'm in Dance, Soccer, Singing and that's helped me because there I have friends and teachers that I can talk to and express myself and that's helped me a lot. (Video)

The students' views on the interconnectedness of play, communication and effective learning are corroborated by teacher Gerson Zambrano, who points out that 'what they learn in Dance the children show in Physical Education, what they learn in Physical Education they reinforce in the classroom'.

Video footage shows the students choosing what they want to do first – computing, English or PE – and a student is heard to exclaim, connecting the role participatory choice has on communication, 'when we plan we talk to each other without yelling ... ok sometimes we yell because some want this and some want that'.

Teacher Luis Díaz contrasts traditional schooling with participatory democracy at Pueblo Neuvo:

> We're talking about a school where the children construct knowledge for themselves according to their needs. The majority of us grew up in schools where beatings, punishments, and recognition were what dominated. Here no, here a child isn't going to compete to be recognised and the child is going to decide what he or she wants to learn. (Video)

Revolutionary Love

Che Guevara (1965 [2005]) once wrote: 'At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.' He also warned against 'cold scholasticism, or an isolation from the masses', and argued that '[w]e must strive every day so that this love of living humanity is transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force'.

This form of revolutionary love is clearly abundant in the Alternative School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development, as is apparent throughout the video. For example, when asked by one of the students how he believes the school has helped the children, teacher Joshua Wilson replies:

> I think that we all want to be loved and here ... those of us that work here love you all very much and that's very good for us and it's also very good for you and it makes you feel good and it makes you understand how special you all are. (Video)

Lilibeth Sanchéz, one of the mothers of the students, concurred with this view when she stated: 'They're very affectionate ... there's always unity between the

teachers and the students ... my kids are very happy. Because they don't seem like teachers, they seem like parents' – a view supported by one of the students, who said of one of the teachers, 'he's like my dad ... Because he's given me the things that my dad hasn't been able to give me ... Spend[s] time with me like a father.'

The Community

The concept of 'community' is an essential element of the Bolivarian process, and a dialectical relationship with the community in the Alternative School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development has been demonstrated throughout this article by the number of times 'community' is referred to by the teachers. In the video, Lisbeida states that everything that is done in the school is an open space where the parents or people in the community can show up and take an interest in something and they can participate, while Luis stresses the importance of 'sensitivity towards the problems that they have around them in the barrio'.

Without a mutually supportive relationship between school and barrio, education for twenty-first-century socialism is meaningless. Joshua underlines the dialectic between school, community and society: 'What happens in the community is just as important as what happens in the school. And for us make the school better also means make the community better and make the society in which we live better' (video).

Empowerment

Empowerment is, of course, fundamental to revolutionary socialist education. In one scene in the video, the camera hovers on these words on the flip chart: 'How can we inculcate empowerment in everything that we do?' This is also taken up by Suggett, who states:

> This alternative school focuses on the empowerment of the children and the teachers too. Anytime there is something that the children can do for themselves without the teachers, we, the teachers, make it a priority to put the job in their hands so that the kids learn not to be managed by others but to manage themselves. (Video)

Lisbeida makes a similar point when she declares: 'They're always looking for something beyond what you tell them or what you show them' (video), while Tamara Pearson argues, when asked in the video why it is important for the children to learn reading, writing and English:

> [W]e want to create people who think. If we don't think, those who have power can dominate us, but if we can read and we can write, we can read the news to know what's happening, we can write and express ourselves, we can confront the powers that exist and we're not so vulnerable.

Pueblo Nuevo 2012

In mid-2012, Edward Ellis revisited the school and talked to its co-founder, Miguel Cortez. Cortez describes how someone from the Ministry of Education described the school as the concretisation of the Bolivarian curriculum, so that in one sense the school is not an *alternative* school. However, in another sense, because no one is actually implementing the Bolivarian curriculum to the same extent elsewhere, it *is* an alternative school. He emphasised the central contradiction between the very progressive ideas in government documents and the difficulty of translating them into practice in the day-to-day curriculum (Cole, 2014b).

Cortez gives the example of a money-raising initiative, initiated by the students, whereby they made pizza from scratch to sell. In so doing, he argues, they were acting as true researchers. Everyone got a chance to be involved, to write, to look after the money and so on. The students provide a model for participatory democracy, and, as Cortez notes, 'they are more democratic than us'. Everyone has access to the money and the treasurer was at the time of the interview a five-year-old girl. Crucially, the students take their activities to the central location of the street. Indeed, Cortez talks of 'taking the streets', which would otherwise be under the control of gangs and narco-traffickers. In a very real sense, the students are helping to foster democratic socialism in the community.

In tandem with the 2013-2019 Socialist Plan, initiated by Chávez (and continuing to be implemented under Maduro), Cortez concludes by stressing the importance of democratising history, of the centrality of local history to bridge the gaps between generations. All histories are important, he concludes, because they occur in the context of life in the barrio. For the development of participatory democracy and twenty-first-century socialism, the barrios need to be organised, and a discourse has to be constructed. The students at the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo are actively involved in this construction, thus providing an exemplar for the resolution of the major contradiction between the progressive policies of the government, and schooling as practised in Venezuelan schools.

What is happening in the School of Community Organisation and Communicational Development serves as an example of the radical change that is needed to create educative practices along the lines of the features of a truly anti-capitalist pro-socialist pedagogy as outlined by Rikowski (2012). The processes involve a lived critique of capitalist society, both educationally and socially, the forefronting of social justice, and socially productive labour with revolutionary socialism at the core.

Note

[1] For a greatly expanded version of this article, including a 2013 e-interview with Tamara Pearson, see Cole (2014a).

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