Title: **Cuba's Academic Advantage: Why Student's in Cuba Do Better in School**
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In *Cuba's Academic Advantage*, Martin Carnoy analyses the success of the Cuban school system as measured by the results achieved by Cuban students in international math, science, and language tests. The study includes data from Chile and Brazil whose students consistently test less well than Cuban students on these same tests despite the fact that these two countries enjoy better socio-economic indicators than does Cuba and educational reform efforts have been undertaken by their respective governments. He references studies, the results of which are well known by researchers, which demonstrate that academic success among socially disadvantaged students is far less likely than for students from better-off families (p. 45). Why does this co-relation not hold true for Cuba? Carnoy argues that an important component of student success in Cuba, including students from lower socio-economic circumstances, is the result of what he terms *state-generated social capital*.

While Carnoy recognizes that many factors impact on student achievement, his thesis is that the success of Cuban students, including students from lower socio-economic circumstances whose families are not well placed to accumulate social capital on their own, results from the benefit they derive from *state-generated social capital*.

Social capital, which is "embedded in relationships among individuals or among institutions and benefit all individuals or institutions involved in those relationships" (p. 11) is a central concept in many analysis of school success in North America and elsewhere. A cohesive and supportive family with high expectations for all of its members is considered to have social capital and students who are members of such a family are very likely to benefit in their educational endeavours from that capital. James Coleman (1966), one of the first scholars to demonstrate empirically that the home environment of American children impacted academic achievement, more recently argued that families with little social capital can acquire it through

dint of effort or, for example, as the result of membership in a social network such as a particular religious community (e.g. the so-called "Catholic school advantage") (Carnoy, pp 11-12).

Carnoy argues that while Coleman overstates the ease with which socio-economically disadvantaged students can acquire social capital, nonetheless he finds the concept *social capital* to be useful. He therefore undertakes to "stand Coleman's notion [of social capital] on its head" (p. 12) by which he means to transform the concept of social capital as one generated by family connections to one that is *state-generated*. He writes "we suggest that states can generate just as potent a form of social capital in promoting educational achievement as families can, and that state-generated social capital is essential to improving educational achievement for low-income groups-those that have the least cultural capital and the most difficulty in acquiring and accumulating social capital on their own" (p. 12).

Cuba's higher ratings than those of Chile and Brazil, despite the island's comparative socio-economic disadvantage, is a result that "departs from what previous studies found. Typically, within a country, the single best correlate of higher test scores is ... social-class background" (p. 141). To explain this apparent discrepancy in the Cuban case, Carnoy focuses on the social context of Cuban schooling. In Cuba, as a result of state policies and programs, children have access to better health care than all but the wealthy in Chile and Brazil; children are well-fed; their parents are employed; families are housed; and young children do not have to work to support the family. Other policies or practices particular to Cuba which directly affect classroom level performance include

- The allocation by the Cuban state of labour and housing which means that parents cannot easily change jobs or move. Consequently, students tend to complete each level of their studies in the school where they started those studies.
- In primary schools, teachers stay with the same cohort of students for 4 years, soon to be extended to 6 years. As a result, teachers know each student well.
- Where a problem does crop up involving a particular student that can't be dealt with in the school, the Cuban state does not hesitate to involve the school and municipal authorities in family matters so as to provide the necessary support to the child, even at the cost of involving themselves in family issues.
- With respect to teacher competence, teachers are considered a high status profession with salaries that varied little from historically more prestigious professions. This attracted bright and dedicated young people to the profession.¹

- Student-teachers attend one of the many state run pedagogical institutes in Cuba whose mandate is to ensure that new teachers are prepared explicitly to teach the national curriculum, with little time given to philosophical issues.
- Once they are in the classroom, teachers, especially new teachers, are closely monitored and their instruction techniques are fine-tuned.
- Standardized test results can be, if deemed necessary, quickly translated into adjustments in policies and practices at all levels from the Ministry to the pedagogical institutes to the individual classrooms where student achievement is below the expected level.

In his conclusions, Carnoy lists four lessons learned from his study of Cuba, Brazil and Chile. Of the four, all of which are drawn from the Cuban experience, three, he argues, could be practiced in Brazil and Chile (and presumably elsewhere) within the framework of the current political and economic structures of those societies. These three lessons are that

- curriculum matters, but its successful implementation depends on teacher capacity. In sort, it doesn't matter how good the curriculum is if the teachers are not professionally prepared to teach it;
- teacher education needs to be tightly coordinated with existing curriculum, something which does not occur spontaneously by which he means that autonomous faculties of education that stress theory over classroom practice (a situation he observed in Chile and Brazil) are not contributing as much as they could or should to student success; and
- instructional leadership and teacher supervision at the school level is key to improving instruction. This means that principals must view themselves less as administrators and more as "head teachers" to use the British terminology who supervise and mentor young teachers.

While improvements can always be made, Canadian educators perhaps have less to learn from Cuba in these three areas than Carnoy suggests is the case for Brazil and Chile. Canadian curriculum, whatever changes critically-oriented educators might wish to make, does provide the framework for classroom instruction, teacher education is very much oriented to preparing student-teachers for results-based success in the classroom. Within the constraints imposed by limited resources, principals, vice-principals and teacher-mentors do monitor and support new teachers, although probably not as much as would be desirable.

Nonetheless, Canadian teachers, and especially those that teach in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, are faced with huge challenges in their classrooms – challenges which have their origin outside of the school. With this in mind, Canadian teachers would do well to consider the

implications for this country of Carnoy's fourth lesson which is that *state-generated social capital matters*. He notes that while individual consumption is low in Cuba, social consumption is high: "poverty exists in Cuba, but even the very poor have access to food, shelter, health care, and education" (p. 144).

In Canada, when community organizations and anti-poverty activists demand decent public housing, access to recreational facilities and after-school programs for young people, enhanced public transit, a minimum wage that reflects the real cost of living, the creation of meaningful jobs for youth that don't require prior job experience and which provide important training on the job, and so forth, they are demanding state-generated social capital. Children are hardly able to take advantage of what school has to offer regardless of how good the curriculum is or how well prepared the teachers are if they come to school hungry, work to contribute to family income, are left alone in the evenings because their mother or their father have to work additional hours to make ends meet, or see no future for themselves. While some of these children will in fact succeed (there are always a few exceptions) most will not. Those that do succeed will, unfortunately, provide the examples that keep alive the view, held by all too many people, including, unfortunately, some educators who should know better, that the failure of the rest results from their personal lack of effort rather than from the social context that informs their lives and limits their opportunities.

The Cuban education system does not represent a model for Canadians but it does demonstrate that, despite the fact that the country is resource poor and at the lower end of those countries in the middle-income group, state policies can create conditions for student success among traditionally marginalized populations. In a country as resource rich as Canada, where the state has access to income that most governments can only dream about, there is no excuse whatsoever for not developing a multipronged strategy involving the Federal and all the provincial and territorial governments to eliminate child poverty and to address the root causes of the problems facing 'at risk' adolescents. Such an approach, combined with a strategy for success at school for these marginalized sectors of the child and youth population, would be politically popular and the results would constitute a proud legacy for any government that participated in making such a program work. If nothing else, Cuba provides inspiration in that regard.

Some readers of this review might quite understandably protest that while Cuba's accomplishments in math, science and language are impressive indeed, is silent on Cuban achievement (or lack thereof) in the area of 'horizons expanding' critical thinking and social problem solving. Certainly, during the heady days of the literacy campaign in the 1960s (documented in

part by Carnoy) observers commented on the emancipatory elements of this heroic stage of Cuban education. In more recent years, an important centre of creative and critical expression is found in the arts – Cuban music, graphic arts, drama, dance, cinematography, and so forth. These artists are, after all, products of Cuba's educational system including its specialized arts schools and demonstrate in their art a critical capacity and artistic insight that is considered world-class. In recent months, Raul Castro has invited Cubans to speak up about shortcomings in the ability of the state to meet certain basic needs of the population (e.g., the housing shortage, salary levels, scarcity of basic consumer items). Cubans have not been shy about doing so. While it is premature to comment on the significance and eventual results of this particular process, it is clear that Cuba will undergo a socio-economic and political transition over the next few years which could go in any number of directions, some not as desirable as others. The scope of Cubans' critical thinking and social problem-solving skills will be evidenced and *authentically evaluated* as they grapple with the challenges that upcoming events will present them as a new generation takes over the governance of the Cuban state and as new opportunities and challenges present themselves.

Endnotes

¹ Carnoy notes that his aspect is being undermined by tourism especially in the provinces of Matanzas and Havana. Bright, bilingual young professionals are attracted by the prospect of earning some hard currency in the form of tips and a disproportionate number of teachers have been attracted by this option creating difficulties throughout the system (p. 32).