

Cuba and the US: Comparing Early Education Policy

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Abstract

The US and Cuba are vastly different in many ways, yet there are commonalities. One similarity is the level of education, as measured by literacy. Both countries report nearly 100% Literacy.^{20,21} How does that happen? US is large and rich. Cuba is small and poor by many measures. Cuban educational philosophy has been influenced by American thought but is also intensely Cuban.²

I have not found many direct comparisons between the two countries. Cuba is included in studies of poor and developing countries, sponsored by UNESCO.³ US is measured against Rich Countries^{17,18}. Visits to over one dozen child centers in Cuba over the last 6 years have given me a broad look at provision for early care, education and health, and raised questions about an obvious expectation that children in rich countries fare better than in poor countries. Various indicators suggest that this is not the case for children in Cuba. One important reason may be almost universal access by children to health care, and to early education through both formal (20%) and non-formal (80%) programs. Both offer children equitable access to early education. I have been able to observe only formal programs, nevertheless my impressions may offer insights and plausible comparisons yielding food for thought in US policy for early child development.

Methods

I compare US and Cuba on two levels. National, and Local

National Level: UNICEF guidelines²⁰. US does not participate.

CUBA: meets 8 out of 10 standard benchmarks for Early

Childhood well being, with no listed information for two. I found plausible references for those benchmarks in internet sources.

US: I list relevant websites that plausibly match the Cuba 2016 data.

Local Curricular Level: Notable Differences.

US: Subscales of the ECERS-R Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale¹⁰. provide an overview of program content and quality.

CUBA: I observed more than one dozen formal early child programs (*Circulo Infantiles*). These look very much like the US in many ways. Non-Formal programs (*Educa-a-tu-Hijo*) produce similar results for child development.

Note: There was no actual ECERS examination of any center in Cuba. (Scale has not been validated for this).

Food for Thought

- What do you think of these differences? Do they strike you as positive or negative?
- Do you see any ways in which the United States might learn from what Cuba has done with early childhood programs?
- In what ways might the US emulate some of the work that has been done?

Unicef Early Childhood Benchmarks

Benchmarks ²⁰	Cuba's position ²⁰	US Position
Policy framework		
Parental leave: 1 yr. @ 50% pay. 2 weeks/fathers.	One-year paid leave. 2 nd ½ can be shared/father.	12 weeks for women in companies with 50+ employees. ⁷
National plan, priority for disadvantaged children	National Action Plan for Children being drafted (2016)	IDEA Reauthorized 2004, Amended 2015, PL114-95 ¹⁶
Access		
Subsidized/Regulated - child care -services for 25% of children under 3. Subsidized/Accredited -early ed.services 80% of 4 yr. olds.	Free Early Child care/education for children 0 to 6 99.5 % served (Most through accredited community-based programs (Non-Formal)	Federal: Head Start Serves ~20% of children who meet FPL guidelines ¹² Infant slots: 1 for every 5 children ¹ Attendance: ⁹ 40% 3yr. 69% 4 yr. 88% 5 yr. Most families pay some. Poor families pay larger% of income ¹¹ .
Quality		
In accredited early Ed. services, 80% child care staff Trained. 50% tertiary educated with relevant qualification.	Systematic training of all staff in both moalties (Formal & Non-Formal) Educators: vocational or university degree in preschool education	HeadStart: ¹⁵ 50% req. BA, Early Child focus. States: Patchy ¹⁵ 33 req. BA 10 req. AA 12 req. BA Public not private centers.
Minimum staff/child ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education	Highest teacher-to-child ratio is 1:13 for 5 to 6 yr. olds	NAEYC Recom. Ratio: 7:1:9 or 10 Highest Ratios:Florida ⁶ 3yr. 15:1, 4yr. 20:1, 5yr. 25:1
1% of GDP spent on early childhood services.	.88% GDP on Pre-primary 2010 ¹³ (No official data)	.35% GDP on Pre-primary 2010 ¹⁴
N		
Child poverty rate < 10%	Few good estimates. ~15% ³ (No official data)	14.1% children 0 – 17 yrs. (2017) ⁴
Essential child health services: Near-universal outreach	Universal access to free health care	5.5%: no health care (2018) ⁵

Notable Differences in Cuba

Space & Furnishings

- Cement and Ceramic surfaces are typical.
- Most activities outdoors. Rooms sparsely furnished.
- Colorful Decorations. Very little child production.
- Gross Motor Climbers: Some. Many are old, rusted, unused



Personal Care

- Hygiene Facilities include bathing areas.
- A nurse and nurse's office are provided.
- Health care is smoothly integrated with education.

Language-Reasoning

- Teachers enhance oral language using laminas (teaching pictures) in small groups.
- Phonemic awareness teaching begins in kindergarten
- Very few books are accessible.
- Little environmental print. Philosophical reservations about this.



Activities

- Art & manipulative materials extremely limited. (Often handmade.)
- No wooden blocks observed, although there are Legos.
- Extensive gardens. Terrariums for observation. Sand & Water play not visible.
- Music and Dance are major group activities.
- Dramatic Play is highly developed with multiple themes available.
- TV and video restricted to 5 Yr. olds, Various learning programs.
- Society is considered AfroCaribbean homogeneous. Racial differences not discussed.
- Children attending with special needs are included with all other children.



Interaction

- No time out! Children are not "punished" or scolded. Grounded in educational philosophy.
- Teachers lead gross motor activities. (Games, exercises)
- Children interact in much dramatic play. I saw one argument. Teacher assisted in resolution.
- One toddler cried upon seeing visitors. She was immediately comforted.

Program Structure

- Dramatic play areas reflect local and national occupations.
- Small, teacher guided groups occur during independent activities.
- Group "performance" is encouraged. Children learn song, dance and recitation.
- Parents decide where to educate special needs children: at home, in a center, or in special schools.



Parents & Staff

- Pleasant Reception areas: Parents enter to wait or relax. Schedules & Information are posted.
- Staff make regular home visits.
- Parents participate! Employers are expected to allow parents time to visit centers. (Time to visit is mandated if a child has special needs.)
- Parents must be included in local curriculum planning.
- Parents/teachers construct all dramatic play equipment and many other materials.
- Lunch & snacks are provided for staff.
- Resource rooms (very small) are provided.
- High expectation for staff to continue professional development. Education is free for everyone.

