

Cuba: In For the Long Haul

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## Introduction

Cuba is a beautiful country. As soon as you land, it feels like you have gone through a time warp and stepped back to a time very different from what many of us are familiar with. The first thing you notice are the 1950's-60's style cars that fill the Cuban streets. The Cuban people have managed to maintain these cars despite the US embargo that prevents trade between Cuba and America. Another prominent feature that you notice immediately is the use of color in Cuba. Many of the buildings, albeit some appear timeworn and not safe for consumer use, are painted in bright vibrant colors. The buildings seem very reminiscent of Spanish colonial style architecture that utilizes variances in color and structures like the stucco archways and tiled courtyards. The influence of Spanish and African culture is very prevalent in the many structures and buildings within Cuba. This same influence is also very present in Cuban culture.

Cuban people are a vibrant mix of ages and colors. Because they are such a diverse group of people, you can find just about every shade on the color spectrum within the Cuban culture. There is a richness and spirit of the Cuban people that you can feel when you hear them talking about their country. They are proud to be Cuban, and would have it no other way despite differences in skin color. With all of these amazing attributes that Cuba has, I could not help but notice that there are still many issues that Cuba is facing. Cuba has made major progress in advancements for education and healthcare, but outside of those sectors there is still much work to be done. So what is in store for Cuba? And can it survive the long haul in its current state?

## Education



Figure 1. Students from the Casa del Niño y la Niña, March 2014

Cuba has made major advancements in the field of education. Many countries have turned to Cuba in trying to figure out how to design and implement a program, similar to Cuba's design, which will provide education to everyone. Cuba's design seems picture-perfect on the surface, but there is more to this design than meets the eye. Currently Cuba's government has their system structured in which by age 5, all Cuban children go to school (Miller, 2002). There are approximately 880,000 preschool-aged children in Cuba attending kindergarten, also called preschool in Cuba. They can attend one of three types of child care centers that focus on preparing them for the next level of their education and teaching them new skills. The schools set rules like children are expected to wear uniforms, parents are required to volunteer at the center, and pre-school children are expected to be in bed at 9 p.m. and up by 7 a.m. (Miller, 2002). The schools' reach of regulation also extends outside of what the normal school day would be for an American child.

Also present in the Cuban format of early education is the involvement of parents. Throughout Cuba, the value of parents' role in primary school is emphasized. The Council of Parents helps to ensure family values in the school. Parents on the council make home visits to other parents to assess ways the schools can provide more information, or help with problems concerning the home environment or absences (Miller, 2002). All family members from aunts to grandparents are encouraged to help. Parents even assist with maintenance and cleaning. Also, if they can, they pay a token payment of 7 pesos a month to support the school (Miller, 2002). This is different from the way that the American system is designed in that we have things like the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) which collaboratively focuses on organizing events beneficial for the school. American parents tend not be as involved in the school system or their child's education. There are those parents that stay involved by volunteering at schools and so

forth, but the lack of parent involvement present in our current educational system still outweighs the other half. The presence of family in the Cuban design is something that Americans could benefit from studying. This could also be one of the contributing factors that has made Cuban education so successful.

Even though Cuba has made advancements in the area of education, their feeble economy has really hindered them from being able to make further progress. Teachers have few materials to work with, even though they are well trained. Equipment is extremely limited leaving kids to use their imagination in play (Miller, 2002). Miller talked about one of the education centers she visited where because toys were so difficult to obtain, the center's two balls were only brought out on special occasions. We even visited a center in the black Cuban community that had very few resources compared to similar centers in other areas of Havana. This lack of resources can be attributed to Cuba's poor economy. Cubans do not have enough money to provide resources for all students, especially with teachers and professors only receiving a monthly income of about \$20. Even those students that complete the highest levels of education may never have the opportunity to make more than this \$20 cap a month. One can see how discouraging this would be for a child considering what they want for their future.

While in the Miami airport, I spoke with Mr. Jorge Salinas who was a secondary school teacher while in Cuba, but is now a mechanic after moving to Florida. He reinforced how disheartening it was to have received such quality education but not be able to use it and still survive financially. He said he enjoyed his time as a teacher, but needed to seek out other opportunities in order to provide for his family. Cuba's economy has really impacted its educational sector and will continue to until something changes.

Cuban children have little access to resources, yet Cuba still has one of the highest literacy rates. Meanwhile, in America we have all of these new hi-tech gadgets in classrooms to make learning interactive and fun, yet we are still ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the world for literacy (Leopold, 2012). Despite Cuba's financial flaws that make its educational design seem weak, many countries can still learn a lot from Cuba. There is a reason it is the top dog and if given the opportunity, Cuba could really make a big contribution to the global market.

## **Race**

Race is rarely discussed on the streets in Cuba. It seemed as though academia focused on how race affects Cubans versus the layman who knows that race is an issue but does not discuss it. While we were in Cuba, the group of gentlemen that we met (black in color), were stopped numerous times for hanging out with us. Every time we asked why the police were stopping them and asking for ID, they replied "it is the norm, you just get used to it" (Samuel & Alex, 2014). For a black Cuban hanging out with tourists, it is expected that you will be harassed by police. Every time we tried to intervene as Americans, the police blatantly ignored us. It was surprising and highly offensive to see a group of people so marginalized in society that they could not even hang out freely with people of their choosing. In Cuba, there is a law that protects tourist against being harassed by panhandlers. This legislative support is necessary for tourist in that many Cubans live close to if not already in poverty so begging for money is common. However, the idea of the police ignoring our request to leave our harmless Cuban comrades alone was very upsetting. I could not imagine personally having to face this discrimination daily, yet many Cubans do.

Castro brought to light the issue of racism in March of 1959. Even though he verbally denounced racism and discrimination making them illegal, that has not stopped black and

mulatto Cubans from being discriminated against. According to statistics, black and racially mixed people occupy labor and social positions that do not correspond with the educational levels they have attained (Dominguez, 2013). They are underrepresented in the tourist sector and in corporations, even more in managerial positions. Except for the music and sport sectors and the armed forces, they rarely assume leadership positions of national and international projection (Dominguez, 2013). Castro along with the Cuban government made attempts to stop racism, but they failed to follow through. This has led to institutional racism persisting over time. It is hard to fight an enemy you cannot see. For black and mulatto Cubans having better opportunities is very limited in the current Cuban system. They feel the direct effects of this institutional racism daily and with the lack of open and public debate about race, there does not seem to be much hope for changing these practices. Even if it is not seen on the surface, race affects how we do business, who we do business with, and even the opportunities afforded to people of color.

### **The Family**

The great Cuban leader Jose Marti once said, “The family is like the legendary ocean from which beauty is born”. The family plays an important role in many cultures all over the world. In Cuba, the family dynamic appears very different from that of American families. In Cuban families, you will often find two to three generations living together under the same roof. While in America, most families tend to separate once the children head off for college. In Cuba, you will find grandparents being just as involved as parents in the rearing of the children. However, in America, there are few resources for the elderly so many families often end up putting elderly parents into senior care homes. The level of respect given to the elderly is vastly different in other countries versus the U.S. Likewise, the value of the family differs from region to region.

Although Cubans have resources for their elderly designed to keep them involved with the community and teach them new skills, the same cannot be said for youth in Cuba. There is an effective education system that works on educating the young in Cuba, but there did not appear to be any programming for adolescents or youth outside of daylight hours. In the day time, we rarely saw young children out and about; albeit, many of them were probably in school. Yet, every night that we went out in the city to be amongst the locals, we saw young people everywhere. My judgments may be slightly biased in that I never asked any of the children how old they were; but needless to say, many of them looked no older than 16. I was personally astonished to see so many kids out in the streets like that. The most fascinating part of this was that even with the multitude of kids in the streets, there seemed to be little violence and no arguments. In America, people would have already called the police as soon as a crowd formed, yet in Cuba you could see police officers out amongst the kids having few to no issues with the youth. This version of adolescent freedom is very different than what you would find in other countries and it makes you wonder what the family dynamic is like if children are spending their nights in the streets instead of at home.

Another big factor that I learned affects Cuban families is this notion of “machismo”. Machismo is the concept of male superiority. In many Latin cultures, the concept of machismo still exist. This affects the family greatly in that when the male tries to exert his power and authority over the female, but is met with resistance, negative outcomes tend to ensue for the family. They explained how even though machismo exists, it is supposedly rarely seen because women have the power and control much of the relationship. Even though women dominate the educational and professional sectors, there is still a problem with abuse and violence against women. Cuba does have stiffer penalties for crimes committed against women, but there does not

seem to be as stiff a penalty for matters of abuse or intimate partner violence within the family. Either many of these cases are going unreported or there are not enough resources to address these issues like how we would in America. The most important part is the impact that violence and machismo have on the family. Violence and abuse begets more violence and abuse, likewise dysfunction breeds more dysfunction. None of these options are suitable for developing children.

Our guide, Ivis Guerra, and Professor Alberto Prieto spoke to us about how Cuban culture does not value things like marriage which is an important contributor to having a successful family. They spoke about how a woman can decide to divorce her husband without cause, and there would be no penalties for that. This devaluing of the marriage union is also becoming more prevalent in the United States. We are finding more and more couples getting divorced leaving the family in a disorganized state of chaos and gravely impacting the children in the family. With the combination of family turmoil, adolescents running free and unsupervised, and lack of resources geared towards strengthening the family, Cuba will always be one step behind. Everything starts with the family. If Cuba ever plans to truly succeed in other arenas outside of education and healthcare, they will have to figure out a way to provide resources for the family.

## **Conclusion**

So what does the future hold for Cuba? Cuba's education sector is strong, but the resources for it are weak. If Cuba can revitalize its economy and get more monetary support from its partners, it may be able to strengthen its already picture-perfect education system. More resources may give many children new opportunities that could be beneficial for them and the Cuban economy, in the long run. Cuba also needs to address the race issue. Race is a big issue in Cuba and will remain that way until people start openly talking about the disparities that exist

between races. A nation claiming to have one identity, Cuban, cannot truthfully be what it claims by negating part of itself. Once this issue of creating equal opportunities for all races is addressed, then we will see the economy start to rebound for all groups. Cuba still has a lot of work to do with its families. Although I am writing from an American perspective, children should not be left to roam or hang out in the streets till 5 or 6 in the morning in any country. Likewise, devalued marriage, abuse, and forms of machismo should not be allowed to persist if they are maladaptive for the family. There needs to be more attention brought to these issues facing families since the family is a big part of an individual's success.

Each one of these areas I have discussed represent an area in which Cuba still needs to make improvements, despite the progress already made. Some may seem perfect and unyielding to change while others may appear to be more pressing in helping Cuba withstand transformations in the future. Either way, each ones of these areas show that Cuba is headed in the right direction. Cuba proved once before that they could rise from the ashes and they will do it again.

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