



A Side Trip to Learning

by MARY VAN THIEL

For eight days in August I experienced a place that has not yet been fully exposed to the effects of globalization and modernization. Eight educators ranging from elementary to university, four from the United States and four from Canada attended Cuba Education Tours whose aim is for participants to partake in the best of island culture at the people-to-people level. The tour was designed for teachers who seek to better understand Cuba and at the same time, opportunity was available to meet and share ideas and strategies for making education more fun and interesting.

As educators it is our responsibility to get our students to address controversial issues in our society. We have to fill in the gaps in our curriculum by bringing in people and resources to our classroom, which lead our students to debate these issues while at the same time encouraging them to analyze and discuss various viewpoints. The more training and exposure we have in current issues the better we can teach and at the same time give students the opportunity to develop critical minds. This educational tour enables educators to gain an understanding of the current conditions in Cuba through three inter-related perspectives – education, the economy and culture. We were given the opportunity to link with teachers not only from North America, but also from Cuba.

The program began in Havana with Dr. Delio Carrera, Professor of History and lawyer at the University of Havana. In his unique way, Dr. Carrera showed us his campus and discussed how the educational system works in Cuba. We were given the opportunity to view its law library and the Hemingway room, a gift from Ernest Hemingway built with the money from his 1954 Noble Prize winnings. The University of Havana, founded in 1728, is an esteemed institute of higher learning with academic ties to venerable universities in Canada and the rest of the world. Dr. Carrera presented a commemorative coin to an educator from the United States and one to an educator from Canada. The Canadian educator, Curtis Magnuson's coin was dated 1983 and commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the 1953 assault on the Moncada Barracks at Santiago de Cuba which is seen as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.



Mary (left) with teachers from America and Canada.

A visit to the Museum of Literacy showed us how changes to the educational system have taken place in Cuba since the revolution. Before implementing a literacy program it is important to understand the social, political, and economic context of the society in which the program is taking place. Director Luisa Campos stated that after the revolution Cuba inherited a society in which over 60 percent were semi-illiterate, could hardly read and write, and what some people define as “functional illiterate”. The disparity between rural and urban Cuba was significant with urban illiteracy being only 11.6 percent, while rural illiteracy was an incredible 41.7 percent. Today in Cuba, despite the embargo, the statistics show how well the educational system is functioning. There are currently 400,000 students enrolled in schools. Ninety-nine percent of the students currently attend school, with a 99.9 percent retention rate. The student/teacher ratio is 13.6 to 1, that is one teacher for every 13.6 students. While there were only a handful of universities before the revolution, all catering to the well to do, now there are approximately 45 universities and institutes with an enrollment of close to 250,000, and with a total of 24,800 professors. The literacy rate is currently 98% with an average 12-grade level according to the UNESCO Report on Education in Latin America. Today, Cuba, although one of the poorest countries in Latin America, shows the best results in education.

We were heartily welcomed at the Union de Pedagogos de Cuba (Cuban Federation of Teachers)

headquarters to discuss the Cuban education system. I was able to present them with NLTA pins as a token of my appreciation, compliments of the NLTA. The Union de Pedagogos de Cuba does not influence curriculum and is responsible for professional development and certification of all Cuban teachers. Its 11 volunteer members are responsible for 23,000 members. It offers courses such as Literacy by Context, Citizenship by Participation, Education in the Community, linguistics and many more courses. They want to increase teachers' standards by offering courses at the Masters and Ph.D. level. It also recognizes outstanding teachers in the 20th century. They help other countries such as Venezuela in their literacy development. Their October meeting was scheduled to deal with "The Challenge of Teachers in the 21st Century", one being the need for teachers to be more professional, not only in knowledge of education but in their behavior as educators. The teaching of reading has always been a contested area in the world, even more so in Latin American countries. Good preparation provides a strong foundation for any effective literacy program, particularly in Cuba.

Helping children become literate is one of the biggest challenges in today's classroom in which all teachers are stakeholders and the Union de Pedagogos de Cuba is working hard to make this happen. Literacy skills often underpin successful learning across the curriculum, whilst building confidence and self-esteem in young learners that is so crucial to success in every area of life.

The language of art has become the next literacy – the fourth "R". In his article, *Cognition and Representation*, Elliot Eisner suggests that education needs to be about forms of representation, which will influence the process, the content, equality and the culture of learning. The importance of having many forms of representation available not only in our school but also in our community is necessary to reach many types of learners. Visual learners are more prevalent today. I found that two artists in Cuba are using appropriate activities for everyone, from those who cannot yet read and write to those who are already fairly fluent readers and writers. According to Dr. William Fagan, in his article *Literacy for the Twenty-First Century*, "literacy is far from being a passive act." Engagement of the learner regardless of level or ability should be evident in teaching. These artists are instilling in the learner a sense of ownership for their learning. Representing and viewing broaden the ways in which people can communicate and understand the range of communication tools. Tapping into the learner's interests, though visual, is one way to enable them to extend their knowledge.

Learning experiences, which allow students to think critically about how images convey meaning, should be essential inclusions in classroom literacy programs.

Callejon de Hamel is an alley in which the façades of all the buildings display murals inspired by AfroCuban religious themes. This area was initiated by the sculptor and painter Salvador Gonzáles, and the project dates from 1990 and highlights the importance of African influences on Cuban culture. The idea was to create a cultural platform within the community. The area is well known for its found art. The last Friday of each month is turned over to recitals of ballads, poetry and traditional music and one Saturday each month the focus is on children's entertainment with clowns, puppet shows and performances.



Some children in front of well known artist José Fuster's studio.

A visit to José Fuster, one of Cuba's most important ceramists and painters at his whimsical studio in Jaimanita, just outside of Havana was a special treat. The artist, who has exhibited all over the world, is spending some of his earnings to improve his neighbors' homes, organizing friends to improve the quality of life in a city where few are truly starving, but most scrimp and scrape to survive. He is also involving the community to be active participants in the process. Fuster is foremost an artist who is dedicated to his creations. He has not only a vast array of artwork from ceramics evoking the nation's African roots, as represented in the Santería religion, but whimsical paintings drawn from ordinary life in Cuba: commuters crowded inside creaky, smoke-belching buses, the ubiquitous dominoes games in backyards and street corners. In person, he brings the passion of his work to his beliefs.

We walked to the Casa del niño y de la niña Community Project where we met with Director Rosa Sardinas for a presentation on the outreach work to kids in the area of Cayo Hueso. The Casa is a community-based project and offers painting, music, dance, computer labs, and other skill development workshops to students after their regular school day.

It also supports learning for teens and adults in the neighborhood. One of the goals of the center is to ensure that students attend school. Its modest facilities comprise classrooms, a playground and small library. Here we met two young students training to be teachers and were entertained by the younger children at the center. Learning English means greater academic, career and leadership opportunities for Cuban youth. In past years, Canadian teachers have worked as volunteers to teach kids and teenagers to learn English. Cuban volunteers initiated the English program at the Casa del niño y de la niña. There is a program for retired educators and ESL tutors to spend three weeks in Havana sharing their English language skills with primary level and university students. Check out Cuba education programs at www.hellocuba.ca or www.cubavolunteer.com/. As volunteers you'll have the choice of planning and teaching English language courses to children, teenagers or mature students. You'll design and prepare your own class content and methodology. There are no Cuban teachers involved. You'll be working directly with one to three students. In order to respond to the challenges of today's diverse learner, the focus of instruction should be on developing strategies to meet students' needs at the classroom, school and community levels. Examining what motivates learners to improve their literacy skills and at the same time offering ways to encourage them to participate and feel a connection will ensure a positive learning experience. At Casa del niño y de la niña we see this in action. Our group presented Director Rosa Sardinas with educational supplies to the center. Our donations, though small, were appreciated by the director and the children.

Our group was given the opportunity to explore the cultural aspects of Havana during our five days in the city. We walked through the streets of Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and saw beautiful colonial buildings. Here we learned about the people those buildings displaced, the reasons many are in a terrible state of disrepair, and the efforts that



Three students who attend the Casa del niño y de la niña Community Project.

international organizations are making to help resurrect them. Visiting the area where Hemingway and Graham Green gained inspiration for their works was an added feature. Our ferryboat ride across Havana Harbor to the municipality of Regla showed us the AfroCuban community, which has a long, rich and still active tradition of African-inspired religions. We visited Regla's church dedicated to the black "Virgen de Regla" Yemayá, the African goddess of the sea in the Yoruba religion and the patron saint of sailors and toured Regla's Municipal Museum. Modern Havana such as the Capitol Building, the Revolution Square, Colon, Malecón Sea Wall, and the Miramar, were a delight. Also included in Havana was a visit to the School of Medicine, the Museum of Revolution (which was housed in the Presidential Palace and displayed the history of the Cuban Revolution), the Havana Forest, and of course, an open air market.

The tour continued to the province of Pinar del Río, a rural district where families raise goats and other animals for the pantry, sale or trade. In Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve, declared a Reserve of the Biosphere by UNESCO in 1985, we visited the rural village called Rancho Curujey, a self-sustaining community whose goals of reforestation, historical preservation, and environmental balance were set up with the help of Canadians. We visited the ruins of a French Coffee Plantation, Buena Vista Coffee Plantation, in Las Terrazas built in 1801 and originally worked by African slaves. Besides acting as a model community for progressive land uses and ecological study, Las Terrazas has recently adapted itself to host tourists. Our wonderful tour guide, Mildred, informed us that all secondary students have to complete a volunteer program as part of their education. She spent three summers working in the tobacco fields. This is similar in part to our Duke of Edinburgh Program where volunteering is a major component. Students in Newfoundland and Labrador can gain credit upon completion of this valuable program.

We spent two and a half days exploring the rural agriculture-based Viñales Valley with its spectacular natural landscape featuring the most interesting and varied geological formations in the Caribbean. The Valley is particularly famous for its great free-standing rock formations called mogotes. In the late 1990s, UNESCO declared it a world cultural and natural heritage site. The Mural de la Prehistoria is a huge painting made on the side of a mogote. This was painted by a local artist to pay tribute to the Darwinian perspective of evolution.

We were also given the opportunity to visit kindergarden "Circulo Infantil" and talk to students and teachers. Mothers who work were able to leave their

children at the center. This center works closely with families in the area. We saw dads who had finished working in the fields picking up their children. We did a walking and boat tour through the Cueva del Indio used by Guanahatabey Amerindians as a burial site, and later as a refuge from Spanish slavers. At the open air craft market in Parque Martí we encountered a downpour, which cut short our shopping. At the local tobacco farm we met one of the many delightful children on our tour and he showed us one of his many baby pigs! We visited an agricultural cooperative in Pinar del Río and met with its members who grew tobacco, coffee, bananas, pineapple root and leaf vegetables. Here we gave educational supplies to the families and we were invited to have coffee in their homes.

The overwhelming hospitality and enthusiasm of all those we met was evident in the smiles and warmth we received from teachers and children. I have many fond memories of Cuba and the wonderful people I met. Yes, there is free time to enjoy the sounds and color of Cuba; I have over 700 photos to view of my visit! While this experience has opened my eyes to the reality of life in Cuba and the impact of life under the Embargo, there is a sense of optimism from the people. The desire and motivation to improve, particularly in the area of literacy, is evident from all that I met.

This was a once in a lifetime experience and for that I am truly thankful. I can highly recommend this trip if you are looking for a different experience from the regular tourist fare that you would get in an all-inclusive resort. It has been through the efforts of all of the people involved that we had such a successful experience. Canadians are welcomed with open arms in Cuba. Everywhere we went we proudly displayed our Canadian pins. Cubans claim Canada is among the few countries in the world that has not turned its back on them. All working teachers are invited to come to Cuba in December 2007 to learn about the island's education and social system and celebrate the New Year in Havana. Contact Marcel in Vancouver (toll free 877-687-3817), email marcel@cubafriends.ca for more details, or email me at maryvanthiel@esdnl.ca and I can share with you some of my many photos.

.....
Mary van Thiel is a Special Education teacher at Macdonald Drive Junior High in St. John's.