

# It's a Long Way from Columbine to Havana: An Educator Looks at Cuba

By Brian Fitzpatrick <sup>1</sup>



**WHEN THE SMOKE** from the Columbine High School massacre cleared, fourteen students and one teacher in my school district were dead, and dozens were wounded. Fortunately, two huge bombs that had been planted in the building didn't explode. Shock waves rippled through the culture and our educational establishment. How had American education gotten to such a terrible and tragic turn? In the wake of Columbine, all of us teachers, veteran and novice alike, were forced to make brutally painful evaluations of our educational goals and means.

I write this essay now from the perspective of my own fifty-year odyssey in American education, which began as a student in strict parochial schools and passed through my first teaching job at PS 118 in New York City. There one February I became the fourteenth teacher that school year of a ghetto fourth-grade class. Thirteen teachers had already been "knocked out of the box"; I barely hung on till June.

I have experienced the gamut of U.S. educational systems. For sixteen years, I studied a parochial curriculum. Nuns, Jesuits, and military high school branded me for life. Upon graduating I taught junior high social studies, math, and physical education. Later, I taught high school business and history and coached football and basketball. Over the years, I increasingly found that standardized testing and technology had replaced the human spirit. Educational policy had lost its heart. The conventional public school system plopped thirty students in front of me every forty-five minutes, and it became my job to "fill 'em up" with information. Eventually I began to feel like Lucille Ball in her famous scene at the bonbon factory. The conveyor belt kept moving; the bonbons kept charging and Lucy adapted. She stuffed bonbons in her mouth, she tossed them over her shoulder, jammed them in her cleavage and, ultimately, she threw them back at the machine. When the kids started looking like bonbons, I gave up factory education for a human approach.

I jumped at the opportunity to teach at Jefferson County Open School, a K-12 alternative school, where I went on to teach for eighteen years. Ironically, the

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Open School and its students flourish in the very same district as Columbine High School, in suburban Denver, Colorado.

The backbone of the school is its advising system, and the heart of its methodology is individual passion. Caring and engagement serve as the bread and butter of our pedagogy. Individual adult attention and friendship nourish the students' hearts, and freedom and passion propel their intellectual ascent. Each student writes an Individual Educational Plan and follows its beacon. I believe deeply in the etymology of the word education. It originates in the Latin verb *educare*, "to lead out of." *Educare* tells us two fundamental truths about the learning process: 1) Curriculum is individual. It grows out of the human heart the way an oak grows from an acorn. 2) *Educare* honors diversity and therefore promotes societal health. Energy in education flows, not from the teacher to the student, but from the student to the teacher. It grows upward like grass. Students are not vases to be filled with irrelevant and disconnected information. They will acquire and use information appropriately when they know who they are, what they want, and where they are going. Our onus as educators is to help individuals identify the songs in their hearts and then support them in finding the courage to sing them.

In the Open School I officially taught social studies and Spanish. The history and Spanish classes I taught were peppered with peace and justice issues. Five Fulbright awards and dozens of trips to Latin America enhanced my eclectic pursuits. When I wasn't reading about Latin America, I was planning to go there. My Fulbrights led me to Pakistan, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico. These experiences spiced up my classes and led me to establish a third-world campus in Teacapan, Mexico, for Jefferson County Open School.

As I traveled throughout Latin America, I observed it with an educator's eye. I saw endless human potential crushed beneath poverty, and I wept at the waste. Thousands of third-world encounters made me a more critical thinker. My firsthand experience frequently didn't jibe with the official stories I read in our popular press. In Bogotá, for example, at four in the morning, I saw a Marlboro salesman get hit by a car. The salesman was five years old. Throughout Latin America school-age kids sell chiclets, pencils, and their futures for a few pesos. Talking with coffee bean pickers in Guatemala, I observed a woman, filthy, on a scalding coffee slope picking beans, her three children hanging from her like rotting papayas. It changed forever the taste of my latte. At the mouth of the Amazon, in Belém, Brazil, at noon in a crowded market, five shirtless, shoeless men robbed me, rupturing a cervical disk. Enduring neck pain reminds me of the economic misery of millions. In our busy lives, we Americans are generally unaware that the socioeconomic and educational reality of most Latin countries condemns close to seventy percent of their populations to poverty. People are either unemployed or earn the minimum wage, which averages between eighty to a hundred dollars per month. Most individuals in that socioeconomic bracket drop out of school early, usually in primary school. In Cuba, however, the scene looked totally different, and the differences are thought provoking.

**CUBA'S IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS** are Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. These Caribbean islands' histories spring from the same roots of slavery and colonialism. Most Americans don't realize that almost seventy percent of Cubans are either black or mulatto. Most Miami Cubans are white. I have never read an article on the racial component of the Cuban Revolution, but just walk through

Miami and then stroll through Santiago de Cuba or Old Havana and you'll realize that race plays a huge role in Miami's antipathy. At the time Martin Luther King Jr. was fighting for blacks to ride at the front of the bus, Fidel Castro was extending dignity to the sons and daughters of slaves. I remember from those years various articles in the U.S. press denouncing Martin Luther King as a communist. I guess we've grown beyond that phobia because now we celebrate his courage with a national holiday.

Gabriela, a forty-five-year-old Afro-Cuban explained to me the different lives her mother and daughter have lived. She understood how much blacks have benefited from the revolution. Her mother was an illiterate servant; her daughter lives with the dignity of higher education and a government-supported safety net. Gabriela is well aware of how black women live forty miles away in Jamaica and Haiti.

Cuba is the only country in the western hemisphere and probably the world that has closed the literacy and longevity gaps between blacks and whites. Just think what a remarkable accomplishment that is. Freddy, a Congolese immigrant who had arrived in Cuba illiterate and who is now a brain surgeon, insisted that post-revolutionary Cuba has done more for blacks than any country in the history of the world. I spoke with many ordinary Afro-Cubans who changed gears easily among Neruda, Pythagoras, Lincoln, Shakespeare, Picasso, and Joltin' Joe Di Maggio.

The heart of my feelings about Cuba result from one special trip. I am retired now, but in my last year of teaching, I decided to take my students to Cuba. My initial plan was to have the Colorado students interact with local students, as they had done in previous trips to Mexico. We applied for and received a license to travel to Cuba from the U.S. Treasury Department; it was the first permission for a high school so granted.

For six months, we beat the bushes raising donations toward our expenses and to buy gifts and supplies for our host school. The students mooched from relatives and begged at businesses. Beyond fund raising, the students' trip preparation included arranging logistics, learning Spanish, reading different versions of Cuban history and group building. Before Christmas we bought the air tickets, and the trip became very real.

Unfortunately for us, it was also the time of Elian Gonzalez and the Miami siege. Elian and his subsequent custody issues dominated the news. One boy, one big hoopla. Had Elian been Haitian, Dominican, Mexican, or any other nationality, he would have been whisked back home faster than overnight mail. But Elian happened to be Cuban and hence the rub.

The U.S. and Cuban government haven't agreed on any issue in the last forty-five years. They can't agree on trade, travel, or immigration, but they did agree that Elian Gonzalez should be immediately returned to his father and his extended family. The only fly in the ointment with this historic agreement became the noisy and powerful Miami Cuban community. They held Elian hostage against the will of two governments and the international community. They never relented and kept Elian until U.S. troops, in a predawn raid, sprung Elian from his Miami "hosts." Little Elian strained governmental relations and, as a result, put the spotlight on our school trip. Hearing of our proposed adventure, NBC wanted to interview me on a nationwide broadcast. I refused because I didn't want my students' experience to be warped by publicity.

Finally D-Day arrived. Two teachers, thirteen students, and forty huge bags rendezvoused at Denver International Airport. After six months of preparation, I felt like General Dwight D. Eisenhower heading for the Normandy beaches.

Poetry has always captured my interest. Robert Frost and W. B. Yeats are my constant back-pocket companions. During my life, I've walked through many doors, but when the doorman at our Havana hotel opened the door and quoted Pablo Neruda, I stopped in my tracks. Immediately I knew that I was in a special place. Most Latin American laborers must drop out of school in the first few years. Never before had I met a blue-collar worker with such erudition. I was amazed. After dropping my bags and my jaw, I volleyed verses with the doorman. It was a battle of Babel. He riffed lyrics in his thick Cuban accent, and I shot back with my New York City *schticklah*. Twenty minutes later he brought out his own poetry and dazzled me. Then the night janitor brought out bongo drums, and two Afro-Cubans opened the Havana night like a ripe papaya. What had been an intimidating arrival into a canyon of tenements and shadows turned into an all-night revelry. The friendships forged that night still endure.

At first, Cuba's capital, Havana, looked like it was cross-bred between Moscow and Harlem. The predominantly African population and the absence of advertising startled me. I knew both facts via readings, but the reality smacked me in the face. People dotted ubiquitous balconies and gossiped with their neighbors; laundry waved above their heads like Buddhist prayer flags. Old Russian trucks carried tons of bananas and dropped them at dispensary outlets. What a difference from our commercial-pocked cities back home! At first, the only printed signs I saw were educational slogans encouraging people to continue studying. I felt both dumbfounded and titillated by this noncommercial environment; however I was trying to hold the reins on thirteen well-fed American kids, so at first, I gave it little shrift.

Our group's initial objective was to visit Cathedral Plaza. The fifteen-minute walk to the cathedral turned out to be a five-hour Gestalt gauntlet. Knowing our objective, I tried to herd my sheep in the right direction. But Havana offers more distractions than a five-ring circus. The students had to touch, see, taste, listen, and chat. Finally I dropped the reins and compulsive teaching habits; I took a deep breath and followed the kids. The day went much better after that. I listened to and served them.

Havana stunned us. Colonial architecture and throbbing African drums set the tone. Baseball, boxing, and ballet added flavor. *Mañana* and *mañana* and *mañana* sped on our hectic pace from day to day. We became so enamored with Cubans we almost forgot our purpose.

The school we hoped to visit was in Guira de Melena about two hours south of Havana. So near and yet so far. Forty miles and a marathon of government red tape separated us; in the era of Elian, the travel time became the least of our problems. I had never had trouble visiting schools in Mexico, Colombia, or Argentina. In Cuba things were different. During that highly politicized time, the Ministry of Education refused to let us enter the school. Perhaps it was the Elian crisis, or the U.S. blockade, or the fear of bad publicity or any number of other issues, but there we stood with a ton of donations and no one to give them to. As feelings fluctuated among frustration, anger, and hopelessness, we went to Cuba's Museum of Humor to laugh. Somewhere between French and Chinese jokes, Alejandro, our Cuban friend, dashed in and yelled, "The Ministry of Education has given us the green light." I thought it was another joke. But, not so. After ten days

and contacts from ex-Senator Gary Hart, we were cleared. We dashed back to the hotel, gathered our gear and sped off to one of the most memorable days of our lives.

Juan Pablo Duarte School looked like a flying saucer that had crash-landed in a cane field. For miles around, no other building blemished the red soil and green Cuban countryside. Castro's revolutionary government had constructed the school to serve agricultural workers. Their sons and daughters attended this school, which specialized in the performing arts. When our van pulled up, our hearts leapt. Outside the school the students had formed a choral gauntlet. Clad in white shirts and gold skirts or pants, two hundred smiling students sang our welcome. They clapped and smiled and ached to close the distance between us. Their eyes greedily took us in. They were as aghast as I had been at my students who were "saggin.'" (For some reason, it's the style for U.S. teens to let their jeans sag down their backside till adults feel compelled to dash over and pull up their pants. Fortunately the antidote is boxer shorts pulled up to the sternum.) So with saggin' jeans and high-ridin' boxers, the students entered the school and shook hands with a cement Che Guevara. Then, the principal walked up to me, stared deep into my eyes, and said, "*Bienvenidos a Juan Pablo Duarte.*" I was electric. We were the first American high school delegation to be admitted into a Cuban school since the revolution.

Students and staff beamed at us. Soon we were swallowed into fifteen clumps and peppered with questions. The students communicated in a mixture of Spanglish, smiles, hugs, music, baseball, stickball, and dance. Introverts became extroverts and extroverts became exhausted. We had met our match. Well-fed, well-educated, well-cared-for Cuban students reveled in their systemic blessings and the musical instruments and tennis, soccer, and basketballs we had brought.

When the chaos settled, we were shuffled to the auditorium for a school talent show. The facility lacked everything except talent. I could see the sky through the roof, the walls flaked like dandruff and the tattered costumes needed replacing. It felt as if we had wandered into a cane-field Juilliard. Russian influence had added Bolshoi training to African exuberance. The combination proved to be an artistic Molotov cocktail. Young boys and girls flitted, pirouetted, and leapt across the stage. We were to hear it a thousand times afterwards, but it was the first time we heard the popular Cuban tune "Carnival": "One shouldn't cry; life is a carnival." A wispy thirteen-year-old girl led the swaying, clapping, singing student body. The auditorium rocked and sizzled. And then, as a gesture of gratitude, three girls appeared with the tap shoes we had donated. The girls had no tap dance training but that was no problem for their ebony feet. They tapped out their thanks and punctuated each "*gracias*" with a snap of their heels.

After the talent show everybody went out to play basketball, volleyball, stickball, and to hit fungo. Kids were spiking, shagging flies, whacking curve balls, and drilling jumpers. I challenged the Cuban principal to a game of stickball. The fans cheered at every pitch. Luckily my days of cutting off my mother's broom handles had stayed with me. My wrists still held their New York education. Cubans have radar in their bats; it's hard to blow a pitch by them. They hit any pitch I threw. They clobbered my spitter. We ended the game in a diplomatic tie and headed to the cafeteria for a feast of beans and rice.

To say the least, I was astonished when I met Cuban students face to face. They blew me away. Cuban teenagers understood social studies better than U.S. students. Their curiosity, vivaciousness, and acumen stunned us. Third graders rattled off times tables like Catholic parrots. Their understanding of geopolitical and

economic realities was superior to U.S. students'. They understood that 85 percent of humanity lives in squalor, and they wanted to correct it. Their global awareness extended well beyond suburban malls. Mind you now, I'm talking about Cuba, a third-world Afro nation, dwarfing any academic performance I'd seen in Latin America and rivaling first-world performance.

**WHILE I WATCHED** the caring, vitality, and engagement in that Cuban school, my mind flashed back to the American tragedy of the Columbine High School massacre. In the depth of my heart I knew that an act of such violence and desperation could and would never occur in Cuba. The despairing alienation that festers in U.S. communities just doesn't exist in Cuba.

If education is not a confluence of mind and heart, it's a Faustian exchange, and it can't really be called education. Unless the heart is engaged, education is incomplete. My hero W. B. Yeats said that "education is not the filling of a vase but the lighting of a fire." The two shooters at Columbine High School were academic whiz kids, but their school system failed to touch their hearts.

I heard that one of the young killers, after he had begun his rampage in Columbine's parking lot and had already shot a number of students, met another student coming out of the school. The shooter looked the kid in the eye and said, "I like you. Get out of here." Because one boy had touched another boy's heart, he was spared. Perhaps if Columbine had touched the killers' hearts, Columbine would have been spared.

I assure you that there were and are more than two alienated students at Columbine or any other conventional high school. Our schools breed alienation. A number of my students have told me throughout the years that the reason they transferred to the Open School was that they felt enraged and isolated, and that they had perseverated on violence like the Columbine attackers had. The advising system at Jefferson County Open School defused their rage and allowed them to feel included. It wasn't for a lack of caring teachers at Columbine that the shooters felt so alienated. It was the fact that the teachers had too many students and too many other tasks, and that the personal and social curriculum are not valued in our impersonal educational factories. A large percentage of American high school students just go through the motions; they are alienated and disengaged. We should be thankful that they don't speak out as violently as the two boys at Columbine High School did.

In faculty lounges, I've heard teachers complain, "They sent us the wrong kids." The kids aren't the wrong kids. Public school education is just that, public. "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming streets." We send these, "the tempest tossed," to public schools. Public schools have been the foundation of our democracy. It is the place where every new wave of immigrants established a foothold on literacy and a new language. It is the place where the dispossessed learned citizenship. As the American family disintegrates and our sense of values and community dissolves into consumerism, our school systems become further challenged. If education becomes solely a consumer product, then the rich will buy the best, and the poor will swallow the dregs. Although capability is evenly and randomly spread throughout our gene pool, the opportunities will go to the wealthiest. The proposed voucher system is bogus because it drains funds from public schools, further undermining them and paving the way for them to be privatized. The voucher system is designed to create a consumer product, not to answer educational need.

Fat educational contracts will go to those with the right "contacts." Personally, I don't want my children or grandchildren in a for-profit classroom.

**JOSE MARTI**, the father of Cuban independence and Cuba's greatest intellectual, educator, and author insisted that "only the educated are free." If that is true, and I believe that it is, most of Latin America and the rest of the world are not free.

Cuba puts her money where Marti's mouth is. It offers ubiquitous institutional support for children, knowing that they are Cuba's future. *Cariño*, which means caring, permeates Cuban schools. Government-supported day care centers help working mothers with their responsibilities. I saw kindergarten students nestled on cots enjoying a siesta. Their teacher sat in the shade and read aloud until the kids dozed off. Every morning and afternoon the parade of neatly uniformed students to and from school heralded the day's passage. After high school, all students are encouraged to continue studying. University costs them nothing. On the contrary, the government pays students a stipend to attend. I blanched when I thought of how many students, in the richest nation on earth, I have heard say, "I can't go to college. I can't afford it. I've got to work." I believe that we can do much more for our children. In fact, Cuba treats her children as well or better than any nation I've ever seen. Elian doesn't have to worry about underfunding or alienation or violence, and his schools don't waste money on armed guards.

In Cuba, education transcends the school; it has become the *raison d'être* of Cuban society. It's enough to make a committed teacher faint with envy. Perhaps this priority is inherent in the name of the systems. Cuba values people, *social...ism*; the U.S. values money, *capital...ism*. As I think about it, the U.S. tends to practice socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. Judging from the recent tax cut for the upper 2 percent income bracket and increases in corporate welfare, it seems apparent that only the rich truly benefit from our system. The rest of us are too busy paying our bills. As I age, I begin to despair for our society. I see profit motive and its excess greed everywhere. Commercial television has even invaded public schools. Cafeterias offer Coke machines and corporate food. School districts are so underfunded that they must turn to corporations to build their sports facilities. In exchange, the corporation has an exclusive right to supply the food and drink to our kids, who in turn then choose Coca Cola over more wholesome milk or juice. In some classrooms, corporate advertising has become part of the curriculum!

In my Cuban wanderings, I bumped into Jasmine, a black woman from Grenada, West Indies. Cuba was paying for her biochemistry degree as long as she agreed to serve the Grenadian poor. During my time in Cuba I met dozens of foreigners studying for free. Fidel Castro even gave the U.S. five hundred medical school scholarships. Most of the U.S. students are African American and have agreed to return to their communities in Harlem, rural Mississippi, and Watts to serve the needy. Cuba trains more than double the number of doctors that the U.S. trains per capita. Because of its plethora of doctors, Cuba exports them to areas of need. What is more peaceful and generous than providing health care? After the apocalyptic hurricane Mitch ripped open Honduras and Nicaragua, Cuba sent doctors to serve the survivors. The following year when torrential rains decimated Venezuela, Cuban doctors volunteered their services. When a friend of mine went on a medical service trip to the mountains of Haiti, the only doctors he saw working there were Cubans. The Haitian doctors lived in the cities and served the rich. Cuban doctors traveled toward need, not toward dollars; they cross borders to hold

neglected hands. It seems to me that the market is not the omniscient distributor that many tout it to be.

The history of Latin America is the history of class struggle. The poor have been fighting for a bigger slice of pie ever since Cortes told Montezuma that the white man has a sickness and the only cure for it is gold. Today, that brutal but prophetic conquistador's words ring truer than ever. How could Cortes predict the Enron, Tyco, WorldCom and the savings and loan scandals? Yes, the gilded sickness still plagues us, but if a society values money over its children, that society is steering toward strife. If American education continues to ignore students' hearts, then it will create a heartless society, which will be a cold and scary place.

When people at home first heard about our trip to Cuba, they reacted with alarm. Some wondered how I could take precious American teenagers to such a dangerous place. I discovered in Cuba that buildings are shabby, street lighting doesn't exist, and the people are neither rich nor white, but women can safely stroll the streets at midnight. It's not the street lighting that guarantees safety; it's the light in Cuban hearts.

Why can't the U.S. put our obsolete Cold War animosities behind us and embrace what's remarkable and good about our nearest neighbor—a neighbor that seems to have solved, even in its poverty, social problems that continue to plague us? We are a nation of astronomical wealth and power, yet we pay only lip service to our children. We need to offer our children the *cariño* and resources to prevent Columbine massacres. Isn't it time to open our minds and hearts to the miraculous accomplishments our island neighbor has achieved for its citizens? American education doesn't need more standardized testing, technology, or bigger schools, and it certainly doesn't need corporate marketers foisting products on our kids. American education could use a dose of Cuban heart.