

Shapers of Their Destiny: A History of the Education of Cuban Children in the United States Since 1959

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.
University of Houston, Houston, USA

Despite the significant presence of Cuban children in the U.S. public schools since the late 1950s, no historical interpretation of their educational experiences exists. This essay is the first to develop such an interpretation. It sketches, in broad strokes, the role that Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans played in shaping their children's education in the U.S. from the late 1950s to the 1990s.

Keywords: Cuban exiles in U.S. schools, agency in education, Latinos and schools in the U.S.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, important work has been done on the history of Latino education (MacDonald, 2001). Although much new information has been published on the history of Latinos in education over the past several decades, the vast majority of this scholarship has focused on the plight and struggle of two specific Latino groups in the schools—Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans (San Miguel Jr., 1986; Nieto, 1995). No significant historical studies focusing on the education of other Latino groups, including Cuban Americans or Central Americans, have yet to appear in the early 21st century, but there is a wealth of information that can be used to develop such histories. This essay is a contribution to that effort. In this essay, the author provides an historical interpretation, albeit, a tentative one at best for now, of the educational experiences of Cubans and Cuban Americans in Miami, Florida from the 1960s to the present.

Most scholars of the 20th century Cuban experience in the U.S. focus on several themes, including immigration, U.S. relations with Cuba, exile politics, literary works of Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans. Few of these works deal with education (Garcia, 1993; Grenier & Perez, 2003).

The limited studies on education generally focus on refugee children and on the ways in which local school officials in Miami and in other southern Florida communities responded to their growing numbers in the schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Mackey & Beebe, 1977; Pedraza-Bailey & Sullivan, 1979; Silva, 1985). Studies on the educational experiences of Cubans in the contemporary period argue that local school officials responded rapidly and in a sensitive manner to the rapid influx of Cuban refugees over the years. These studies, while important, fail to show agency on the part of the Cuban community. They generally view them in passive terms and ignore the various ways in which Cubans themselves responded to their new situation in the United States. Cuban exiles were not simply receiving the benefits of American generosity. They actively participated in shaping the education their children received. Cuban exiles responded in creative ways to their new situation in the United States. They contributed to the planning and implementing of educational programs, assumed

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., professor, History Department, University of Houston.

administrative and instructional positions in the public schools and developed or purchased appropriate Spanish language instructional materials for these programs. By the 1970s, Cuban Americans also began to get elected to local school board positions and influenced the making of educational policy affecting their children. The following essay then sketches, in broad strokes, the role that Cubans—both exiles and Cuban Americans played in shaping their children’s educational opportunities.

Agency in the Design and Implementation of Educational Programs

The focus on local school district responses to Cuban refugee children, while important, suggests that the Cuban community was not actively involved in the education of their children. But this is inaccurate. Cuban refugees actively sought jobs as public school teachers, counselors, and other professional staff in the schools, participated in teacher certification/re-certification programs, enrolled in university-based teacher training institutions to assume their role as educators of these children, helped design bilingual programs, and developed or purchased appropriate Spanish language instructional materials for these programs.

As early as 1963, a few Cubans were hired as teacher aids in several of the public schools throughout the Miami Dade County area. One of these included the Coral Way elementary school that eventually established the first bilingual education program in the country in this era. A number of these aides were also participating at the time in the Cuban Teacher Retraining Program at the University of Miami in nearby Coral Gables. In this year, six of these aides were hired as Spanish teachers for the new bilingual program in this school (Mackey & Beebee, 1977, pp. 65-66).

The number of Cuban and Latino educators increased in the next several years as the bilingual program expanded into the higher grades and into other schools. The number of Cuban teachers in the Coral Way Elementary School, for instance, increased from four aides in 1963 to 25 teachers almost a decade later. Central Beach elementary, the second school in Miami to establish a bilingual program starting in 1966, also hired Cuban aides and teachers. By 1973, four special “Spanish” teachers and two Cuban aides were providing instruction in the Spanish language at Central Beach. By 1973, Cubans comprised approximately 7% (722) of public school teachers in the district. Although their percentage was small relative to the student composition, which was almost 25%, it suggested active agency on the part of the Cuban community (Mackey & Beebee, 1977, p. 51, 70, 90).

Cubans also became administrators and helped design bilingual programs and implement bilingual education program. As administrators, they purchased or encouraged the development of appropriate Spanish language instructional materials for these programs. The percentage and numbers of administrators increased over time so that by 1973, approximately 3% (25) of the administrative staff were Cubans (Mackey & Beebee, 1977, p. 51). Although small in numbers, Cubans were then not merely passive recipients of a generous education, they actively helped shape that education.

The experiences of three Cuban administrators hired to implement the first bilingual education program in the country at Coral Way Elementary school in Miami Dade County illustrate the active roles they played in the education of Spanish-speaking children in that district. The three experienced Cuban educators hired to implement and to train teachers for the new bilingual education program at Coral Way Elementary School in the early 1960s were Rosa G. Inclan, Herminia Cantero, and Illuminada Valle.

Inclan, born in Havana, Cuba in 1921, studied in both the U.S. and Cuba. She was the director of the training program for teachers of English as a second language at the University of Havana before her departure

to the U.S. in 1960. In Miami, she helped draft the proposal that eventually led to the establishment of the first bilingual education program in the country. She also became a teacher trainer in the district, and then, in 1969, was appointed to the position of coordinator of bilingual education for the school system. Cantero was born in Las Villas province in Cuba in 1915. She was the supervisor of English as a second language instruction in the public schools in Cuba before departing to the U.S. in 1961. She helped shape the proposal for bilingual education and participated in the training of teachers for this program. Valle likewise was born in Cuba in 1922. She settled in the Miami area and worked as a Cuban aide and then as a second-language teacher in the first bilingual schools. In 1974, Valle was appointed assistant principal of the Coral Way Elementary School (Mackey & Beebee, 1977, pp. 66-83).

Power and Politics in Public Education

Another important aspect of the education of Cubans in the U.S. is the struggle for power. This struggle was reflected in their efforts to assume important positions of influence within the schools.

The initial emphasis of this effort was on getting access to positions in city and county government. This began in the 1970s. Prior to this decade, Cubans were establishing themselves in Miami and gaining a foothold in the economy. Once they became a dominant force in the economy, they began to discard earlier reservations about participation in American politics and to focus on increasing their presence in electoral politics. Their citizenship rates increased, they became an important component of the voting population, and they began to get elected to local and county positions (Garcia, 1996, pp. 137-146).

The following decade, Cubans became a significant force in Miami politics. Based on the redrawing of district boundaries and their own desires, Cubans ran for office and got elected to several important state and local positions. In 1982, they won a total of 11 seats in the Florida state legislature (three in the Senate and eight in the house) and in 1985 Xavier Suarez, a Cuban exile, was elected mayor of the city of Miami. The following year, Cubans won majority control of the city commission and held almost all of the city's major administrative positions. Cubans also got elected to the U.S. Congress and in 1989, state senator Ileana Ros-Lehtinen became the first Latina and the first Cuban American to win a congressional seat from South Florida and to serve in Congress (Geron, 2005, pp. 140-141).

The emergence of Cuban Americans as a political force was noted by several scholars when they reported how within a 12 year period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s Cuban office holding in the Miami area increased from four to 40. By 1989, Cubans held six mayoralties, city council majorities in several cities, including Miami, Hialeah, West Miami, and Sweetwater, 10 of the 28 positions in the Dade County delegation of the Florida legislature, and a seat on the Metro Commission and Dade County School Board. With respect to appointive politics, Cubans by the late 1980s, held positions in county manager, city manager in the city of Miami, and superintendent of the Dade County schools. They were also an increasing percentage of county and municipal employment (Warren, Corbett, & Stack Jr., 1990, p. 170). In this period, in other words, we see the ascendancy of Cubans in electoral and appointive politics in the city of Miami and in Dade County.

The struggle for power in education was a part of this Cubano ascendancy in electoral and appointive politics in that county but it developed slowly. This effort began in 1984 when Paul Cejas was elected to the school board in Miami and became the school board chairman. His election significantly broke the pattern of Cuban exclusion from school board politics and initiated a new trend towards structural inclusion. Although included, Cuban participation was limited to one of tokenism for the next decade. By 1991, for instance,

Cubans still had only one member on the nine members Miami-Dade County School Board (National Roster of Hispanic Elected Officials, 1991, p. 47).

Sometime, during the late 1990s or early 21st century, they gained majority control of the Miami-Dade County School Board and they have maintained that control. In 2007, for instance, five out of the nine members on the Miami-Dade County School board were Cubans (Retrieved August 30, 2007, from <http://www2from.dadeschools.net/schoolboard/bdmembers.asp>). When did they begin to get elected to local and county boards of education and when did they become a majority of the board? What explains this increased involvement in school politics and how does it relate to the general quest for power in American society? How did they influence public education policies? These are questions for which we do not yet have answers.

With respect to appointive office, one of the most significant actions took place in 1988 with the appointment of Joseph A. Fernandez as superintendent of Miami-Dade County public schools. Fernandez, born in East Harlem of Puerto Rican parents, was a former high school dropout, a University of Miami graduate and a teacher and administrator in the district for over 20 years. As superintendent, he sought to transform public education in that city and improve its instruction. He initiated and led the restructuring of public education in the country. Restructuring, or more specifically, “school-based management”, a new approach to school reform, was in use in 130 of Miami’s 260 schools when he left to become Chancellor of the New York City public schools. Although he was convinced of the effectiveness of this approach, not enough information on its effectiveness in improving school achievement was available by the time he left the position in 1990 (Tifft, 1990). More research, however, is needed to find out how he did this in Miami-Dade County, the impact it had on instruction, and its ultimate consequences.

Community Mobilizing Against Discrimination

Despite the relative ease in which Cubans gained control of the public schools and their children obtained equal access to quality instruction, the Cuban American community occasionally mobilized to struggle against racism in the larger society and discrimination in school treatment. Several specific incidents in the period from the 1970s to the present illustrate this type of struggle more reminiscent of what Chicanos and Puerto Ricans had been and were engaged in during the entire 20th century.

The earliest indication of community mobilization against perceived wrongs occurred in 1968 after a report by public school officials estimated that the dropout rate among Cubans and Puerto Rican students in the Dade County public schools was higher than the dropout rate for the county students as a whole. The low percentage of Cuban teachers and administrators encouraged community members to demand the hiring of Spanish-speaking teachers, counselors, and other staff members proportionate to the Spanish-speaking student enrollment. The board was also asked to expand its bilingual program to prevent Cuban students from dropping out of school. The board responded affirmatively to these demands (Mackey & Beebee, 1977, pp. 49-50).

Another incident occurred in the summer of 1980 during the Mariel boatlift. Although not specifically an educational issue, it had implications for school language policy in general and bilingual education in particular. This incident related to the opposition by Anglos and to a large extent blacks to a bilingual resolution in the books since 1973 (Mohl, 1989). An Anglo group named Citizens of Dade United mounted an assault against the bilingual resolution and used the petition process to force a county referendum on a proposed anti-bilingualism ordinance. The ordinance proposed that “the expenditure of county funds of the purpose of

utilizing any language other than English, or promoting any culture other than that of the United States is prohibited” (Mohl, 1989, p. 152).

This proposed ordinance was opposed by a variety of Latino groups, including a new organization called the SALAD (Spanish-American League Against Discrimination). Despite this action, the ordinance passed and was approved by a substantial majority of Dade County voters in November 1980. Cuban Americans, for the first time in this country, had lost a major battle over language rights. In some respects, they were now being treated similarly to Chicanos and Puerto Ricans. They were slowly becoming a racialized minority group in this country (Mohl, 1989).

Establishment of Private Schools

A final aspect of Cuban involvement in education dealt with private schooling. Cuban children not only attended public schools. They also enrolled in Catholic parochial institutions. Superintendent of Dade County public schools Joe Hall noted that in 1961 over 2,650 refugee children were enrolled in the Catholic schools. The Catholic parochial schools, noted Sylvia Crothers, director of Florida Children’s Commission, were “stretched to the breaking point” (Carothers, 1961, p. 5).

Cuban exiles did not limit themselves only to religious institutions. They established their own private schools or else enrolled their children in private sectarian institutions (MacDonald, 2004). Between 1959 and 1973, Cuban exiles established a variety of after-school programs aimed at maintaining the community’s identity. San Juan Bosco Church in Little Havana, for instance, opened a small religious after-school program in 1967. The Escuela Cívico-Religiosa offered grade school and high school students’ religious instruction as well as courses on Cuban history, geography, and culture after school each day (McNally, 1982, p. 153).

Additionally, Cubans established dozens of small private schools nicknamed “las escuelitas cubanas” (the little Cuban schools). Over 15 private schools were established during the 1960s and early 1970s. Initially, the teaching in these schools was mostly in Spanish but they soon became bilingual as more English was added to the instruction (Mackey & Beebee, 1977). By 1990, at least 30 private schools existed. Among these were the Conchita Espinoza Academy, Miami Aerospace, La Luz, Lincoln-Martí, La Progresiva, and José Martí School (Garcia, 1996, p. 91).

Cuban exiles likewise transplanted some of Havana’s best private schools and re-opened them in Dade County. As Maria Cristina García noted, these schools, in order to obtain state accreditation, met state curricular guidelines but retained much of their original staff and faculty from Cuba. The utilization of personnel from Cuba allowed them to offer some cultural continuity between the old and the new country. Those who sent their children to these schools were assured of a quality education to participate successfully in either the United States or Cuba. One of the better known private schools was Belén Jesuit, originally founded in Cuba in 1854 by Isabel II of Spain. Its alumni included distinguished scholars, scientists, clergy, and political leaders. The Belén Jesuit School was opened in Miami after the Cuban government confiscated its classrooms and libraries and expelled the Jesuits. It originally opened at the Centrol Hispano Católico, then on Flagler Street in the heart of Little Havana, and finally in the southwest part of the Miami suburbs (Garcia, 1996, p. 91).

Conclusions

Although little information exists on the Cuban role in education, the author has suggested that this history

is quite complex and both different from and similar in some ways to the history of ethnic Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Unlike the history of the two other large Latino groups in the country, local school officials, as most scholars who have written on this topic note, responded rapidly and in a sensitive manner to the rapid influx of Cuban refugees over the years. Similar to these other racialized Latino groups, Cuban educators and community activists played active roles in the education of their children. They sought to shape and influence the education their children received in this country by helping to plan and implement the various programs serving Spanish-speaking children in the public schools. They also challenged policies viewed as detrimental to their linguistic and cultural interests and actively sought positions of influence in local, state, and national policymaking structures. Their political status as refugees and their white racial and middle class background as well as the Cold War context facilitated their involvement and ensured that they would become influential agents able to shape their own educational destinies. This brief history of Cuban activism in education suggests that they were not merely passive recipients of Anglo generosity but active agents in the schooling of their children. They were, in several important ways, actively shaping their own destiny in the public schools of America.

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