

Lindsey Hazel, “Venezuela: Overcoming Historical Oppression through Education”

...It is also important to note that, while Chávez has played a large role in popularizing Freire’s theory of liberation through education by increasing government funding for Bolivarian schools and missions, he was not the creator of Venezuela’s educational revolution. In reality, the success of the Bolivarian revolution in education is actually the work of Venezuelans themselves. One can look to the Zaragoza School, located in Palo Verde, Venezuela as an example. The Zaragoza school was constructed in 1992, six years prior to Chávez’s election. Goya, the principal of the school, emphasized that that the school was established not as a product of Chávez, but rather on the principle of liberation through education. In order to fund this school, the community took the initiative to apply to various educational grants, and was awarded a grant by a Catholic Ministry (1/12/07). For this reason, it is possible to see that while Chávez has increased and popularized education in Venezuela, Venezuelans were working toward increasing educational opportunities prior to Chávez.

Bolivarian Schools and Missions

One way in which Chávez has standardized education in Venezuela is through setting educational goals. In reviewing the outline of the 2001-2004 Plan for Education, it is possible to observe Chávez’s progressive plan to achieve universal education among children. The goal of this education plan is to “ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015” (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 19). Six specific guidelines were established to help achieve universal education in Venezuela in a “Plan for Education” between 2001 and 2004. The first initiative promised access to education, establishing that access to education should be viewed as a “human right” and “social duty” (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20). The second initiative included a commitment to increased enrollment, focusing not only on promoting enrollment in preschool, elementary school and high school, but also in professional programs. This clause of the plan also specified that, “special attention [would be granted] to frontier, rural and indigenous populations” (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20). A third initiative of the education plan was to “connect the educational system and the system for the production of goods and services” (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20). By joining education and business, it was hoped that graduates of the education program would receive the necessary training to find a job following their completion of the program. Overall, it was argued that the educational system would be socially validated if it was easier to find a job following such a program. A fourth initiative in the guideline for education provided supplies to educational organizations, and oversaw the building of new schools when appropriate. The fifth initiative focused on educating all children, even adolescents and young adults that may have no prior educational training. The last initiative of the Plan for Education included eliminating illiteracy to increase the integration of Venezuela’s social classes. Venezuela’s Plan for Education created a framework of feasible goals to promote universal education.

In order to achieve the goals of the 2001-2004 Plan for Education, in 2001 Chávez began to promote the Bolivarian Educational Process. With the purpose of integrating children who were previously excluded from an education in Venezuela, full-

day school was established with more state funding and public schools could not charge enrollment fees for attendance (Sánchez, 16). Access to education increased with the creation of the Simoncito Project, Bolivarian Schools, Bolivarian High schools and Robinson Technical Colleges (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20-21).

Beginning with the Simoncito Project, the 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Venezuela declared that children aged 0-6 receive a universal pre-school education. In 2005, two thousand classrooms were in the process of construction, with the goal of providing sixty thousand preschoolers with an education. This goal should be more feasible with the proposed creation of an additional 10,000 preschool buildings. To specifically counter past inequalities, Simoncito classrooms, as opposed to regular preschools, provide a maternal environment for poor children. In addition to developing early learning skills, the children also receive medical attention from physicians (*The Bolivarian Education*, 9).

Significant improvements are also observed in the increased number of Bolivarian schools and the increased programs offered in Bolivarian schools from 1999 to 2005. At the beginning of the project in 1999, Venezuela's educational system was comprised of only have 559 schools. By 2005, it is estimated that the number of schools will have increased to 3, 807 (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20). The programs offered within these schools have also improved. At the level of elementary school, in addition to receiving a traditional education, students also learn about proper nutrition, receive homework help, and are provided with recreational activities (*The Bolivarian Education*, 12). This integral approach that was used at both the preschool and elementary levels continues at the high school level, as enrollment priority at high schools is granted to those students coming from rural and indigenous communities to counter past exclusion (*The Bolivarian Education*, 13). In addition to an increase in integral programs, the resources at the high school level have also increased. In 2004, "twenty-six Bolivarian High Schools were provided with learning resource centers and laboratories for endogenous development" (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 21). In contrast, the same centers and laboratories were predicted to be established in 280 schools by 2005.

In addition to an increase in the number of schools found in Venezuela, as well as an increase in the quality of educational programs for the poor, Robinsonian Technical Colleges increased in Venezuela from 174 in 1999 to 208 in 2001. The focus of the Robinsonian colleges is to train students as a technical-professional in one of seven areas. The seven areas include: "Agriculture and farming, Arts, Social Promotion and Health Services, Industry, Commerce and Administrative Services, Security and Defense, and Bilingual Intercultural Education" (*The Bolivarian Education*, 14). It is hoped that by training the students as technical professionals they will be able to assume jobs in Venezuela's productive sector. These schools have been remodeled to provide students with new technology that aids in their training. The program can be considered successful through an observation of increased enrollment from 25,478 in 1999 to 92,243 in 2002 (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 21). Further demonstrating the success of the Robinsonian Technical Colleges, enrollment also increased for the Adult Education Programs, as well as for the Special Education program.

As a way to liberate the oppressed Venezuelans through education, Chávez has also experimented with the construction of missions. Missions represent a method for

Venezuelans to actively participate in discovering solutions to *their* problems. In reference to the missions, Sánchez writes:

They are formed around President Chávez's concept of granting power to the poor so they become protagonists in their own emancipation and can gain more power and fortify their principal role in the defense, support, and development of the Bolivarian revolution. (8)

In accordance to Freire's work which emphasizes the role the oppressed play in changing their own conditions, Chávez initiated missions to aid the poor in breaking the historical inequality found in Venezuela. In doing so, he has shown his commitment to promote equality for all social classes of citizens in Venezuela (Sánchez, 8).

The first literacy mission established in Venezuela was Mission Robinson. During May and June of 2003, Mission Robinson served as a trial literacy program modeled after the Cuban literacy program, "Yes I can" (Sánchez, 17). Due to its success, beginning on July 1, 2003, Mission Robinson was expanded and served urban barrios as well as Venezuelans located in geographically diverse areas, including the jungles and mountains. Through a seven week program, the students, called patriots, attended a series of sixty-five classes (Sánchez, 17). In these classes, the patriots learned to read and write through audio-visual lessons. By December, the program had proved successful in achieving literacy for one million Venezuelans. Other achievements of the Mission Robinson included the creation of 78,957 "study centers" for the patriots equipped with 80,000 televisions and video players (Sánchez, 17).

On October 28, 2003, Mission Robinson II was launched in order to guarantee that all Venezuelans who could read and write also received an education equivalent to that of the sixth grade (Sánchez, 18). Using audio-visual materials similar to those of Mission Robinson, Mission Robinson II was divided into two stages. The first stage presented the patriots with material corresponding to material taught at the fourth grade level. Within this first stage of Mission Robinson II, mathematics, language, history, geography and natural sciences were taught. The second stage of study began at a fifth and sixth grade level, introducing computers and English into the curriculum (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 11). Reflecting a motto similar to Mission Robinson, Mission Robinson II uses the slogan, "Yes I can go on". The results of Mission Robinson II corresponds to its motto, as 60 percent of the 1.2 million patriots enrolled in Mission Robinson II in 2003 had recently become literate through Mission Robinson, proving they could go on (Sánchez, 19).

A third mission, Mission Ribas, launched on November 17, 2003, focused on providing adults the opportunity to complete a secondary education. Only a few weeks following its creation, over 800,000 people enrolled to participate in Mission Ribas. This program was unique from both Mission Robinson I and II in that it was organized through the Ministry of Energy and Mines and PDVSA. According to Sánchez, the role of both the Ministry of Energy and Mines and PDVSA demonstrates their commitment to promoting peoples' interests and the goals of the Bolivarian Revolution. Similar to both the first and second Mission Robinson, Mission Ribas uses audio-visual methods to educate people in "the areas of science, humanities, and technology" (Sánchez, 19). Additionally, Mission Ribas ensures completion of their program in two years.

The final educational mission, Mission Sucre, was established in 2003 to guarantee access for Venezuelans previously denied access to a system of higher education. With this in mind, Mission Sucre was formed around a theme of social justice. The goal of this mission was to improve participation in all levels of Venezuelan society through increased education and knowledge in order to create a more democratic society (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 11). In response to the large numbers of the Venezuelan population who required the services of Mission Sucre, students were first organized into groups to attend a refresher course to prepare the students for their university studies through Mission Sucre (Sánchez, 20). Mission Sucre uses a technique known as municipalization, in which there is both regional and local focus within the educational system. Therefore, university classes usually address the “needs, problems, cultural values, demands and potentials” of various geographical areas within the country (*The Bolivarian Revolution*, 18). With a focus on local issues specifically affecting a person’s life, the municipalization of Mission Sucre allows students to transfer their knowledge from the classroom and use it in the real world.

In addition to Mission Sucre and also contributing to Chávez’s guarantee of a higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education was established in 2002 that led to the creation of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela in July of 2003 (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 21). Through the university, Venezuelans were not only guaranteed access to a higher education, but more regions of Venezuela were served, as the university’s five campuses were scattered throughout different regions in Venezuela. Additional guidelines for the university included an ease in the transfer of students and teachers from one campus to another, increasing the quality of education received, improving the importance of higher education within Venezuelan society, as well as improving cooperation among national and international Higher Education Institutions (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20). From 2003 to 2005 student enrollment in the university had progressively increased. Initially, in 2003, 78,332 students enrolled at the University. Adding together the enrollment in both September and November 2004, an additional 507,028 students had entered. By May 2005, 70,000 more students were anticipated to have joined the university program (*Venezuela: Conquering Social Inclusion*, 20).

Conclusions: The Impact of Venezuela’s Educational Revolution

Venezuela’s Ministry of Communication and Information, in accordance with Freire, states that education plays a large role in the process of gaining human rights. The ministry defines the implications of education, stating, “Within the revolutionary process, the Bolivarian education is the system that dissolves the social debt generated by the system of exclusion, and creates a model of social equilibrium . . .” (*The Bolivarian Education*, 10). Considering Venezuela’s history of inequality, my research in Venezuela focused on whether education is helping Venezuela to overcome its past inequalities. In order to do this, I will first analyze the accessibility of education for both children and adults. Additionally, I will focus on how Venezuelans are countering oppression according to the liberation theology of Freire. Finally, I will outline the impacts that education has had on individuals and its effect on whole communities in Venezuela.

Through discussion with students at La Pastora School, a Bolivarian high school, I was able to learn about the educational opportunities available to the children in the community. Although a neighboring school provided children with an elementary

education prior to Chávez, it was not until the popularization of education by Chávez that children could continue their education past this level. In order to do so, the children would have not only had to pay for their education, but they would have also had to commute, in some cases, for more than an hour and a half to reach the nearest school. The students that were in their first and second years at La Pastora ranged in ages 12 to 18. This range of ages signifies that La Pastora is the first time the 18 year olds have been able to receive an education since they finished elementary school. Of the seventy total students that attend La Pastora, only 2 or 3 in the fourth year class had been able to afford and commute to the closest high school. Since the changes within the educational revolution, however, a student in her third year at La Pastora commented, “there’s no longer an excuse for not having an education” (La Pastora, 1/11/2007). This student, along with others at La Pastora indicated an increase in educational opportunities since the popularization of the Bolivarian education.

Although La Pastora provides its students with an education they were previously denied, there is still room for improvement. Student’s attendance is often affected by the weather conditions which may prevent the students from walking to school. Additionally, students often miss school during coffee growing season. With coffee as the predominant source of income for the student’s families at La Pastora, many students must help their families in the fields. In order to improve the attendance rate of the children, it has recently been proposed that the school year be changed to correlate the students’ vacation with the coffee picking season. This provides an example of how the educational revolution is encouraging more changes in the accessibility of education for Venezuelans (La Pastora, 1/11/2007).

The educational missions proposed by Chávez have experienced similar success to the Bolivarian school system by ensuring an accessible education to adults. After speaking with several groups of Mission Ribas and Mission Sucre students, there were a variety of reasons that the adults did not have the opportunity to earn a higher education. Many voiced that the closest universities required hours of commuting and were expensive. Some stated that they needed to work to help provide income for their families, while some women stated that they were forced to marry young due to pregnancy. Educational missions were created in response to these challenges faced by many Venezuelans. Not only are the missions established locally, but they are free. Additionally, students can choose the class times that are most convenient for them, in order to ensure that their work day is not affected. It is possible to attend evening classes Monday through Thursday from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. or classes on Saturdays and Sundays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. As for the female students trying to balance the responsibilities of caring for families and running households, it is accepted that women bring their children to classes with them. The initiative to establish a free child care program is also underway. Women also stated that they rely more on their families, including husbands, parents, other relatives and their older children to care for their young children while they attend classes. When asked about the availability of finding such classes, a Mission Ribas student responded, “We used to search for places to study, now teachers come knocking on our doors.” (Mission Ribas, 1/9/07) Using this evidence, it is possible to conclude that the educational missions have experienced success similar to that of the Bolivarian schools in ensuring an education to Venezuelans who were previously denied an education.

Freire describes several ways that people can be oppressed, not only including lack of material wealth. Other methods that foster oppression include a lack of self-worth and a lack of confidence. As discussed previously, this cycle must be broken by the actions of the oppressed. Conscious of the need to overcome past oppressions for themselves, the adults from Mission Sucre expressed how education is changing to allow for their success. According to a one student, the new form of education in Venezuela is “breaking down the concept of what a classroom is” (Mission Sucre, 1/10/07). Instead of memorizing information from a book, he stated that students are encouraged to bring their own experiences to the classroom. The same message was repeated several times, with another student stating that she was proud that she was able to study and learn through a creative process and not “copying and dictating the words of the dead” (Mission Sucre, 1/10/07). Honario further asserted that, as is described by Freire, people need to interpret for themselves in order to change their way of thinking from being oppressed to being a liberator in their own education (1/10/07).

Through discussion with the principal at the Zaragoza school in Palo Verde, I was also able to observe the importance of equality found within children’s educations. Goya, the principal, cited several examples of the equality found between students and teachers within the Zaragoza school. First, she noted that while students used to address teachers with titles, students now address their teachers by their first names in order to discourage superiority. In the past, the students at the school were also required to stand when a teacher entered the classroom, out of respect for the teacher. However, it was argued that teachers do not stand for the students, and therefore, in order to promote equality, the students now remain seated when teachers enter the classroom. A third example of the equality between students and teachers can be found in the lunch room. At lunch time, instead of teachers standing at the front of the cafeteria line to receive and eat their food first, teachers wait with their students and the students and teachers eat together. A final example that Goya cited as a test of the equality found between the students and the teachers is the task of cleaning the school. Since the Zaragoza school has no janitors or cleaning staff, it is up to the students and teachers to clean the school. Goya stated that, instead of having the teachers dictated what needed to be cleaned to the students, it is expected that the teachers and the students together will clean the toilets (1/12/07).

With an education that establishes equality between the teachers and the students, children and adults are gaining confidence which was denied to many prior to the educational revolution in Venezuela. In speaking with a teacher at La Pastora, Zoraida, she commented that for her students, education was not just about learning their eight subjects, but that it was learning how to be humans. Additionally, she stated that although the students may not become the teachers, lawyers, doctors, or veterinarians that they claimed they would like to be, the students are gaining confidence through an education to dream (1/11/07). Jacqueline, an adult student at Mission Sucre reiterated the same theme, stating, “my education has taught me to be more human and love my culture” (Mission Sucre, 1/10/07). These observations provide examples of how the Bolivarian schools and missions are helping Venezuelans to overcome a past which denied them their confidence and self-worth.

Only time can determine whether or not the educational revolution in Venezuela is “dissolving the social debt generated by a system of exclusion” as the Venezuelan

government claims (*The Bolivarian Education*, 10). Through observation of students in Venezuela, however, the community involvement of children and adult students is significantly improving the community. Due to these results, I argue that the Venezuelan government's attempt to overcome past oppression through education is promising.

As an example of the improvements in Venezuela's community resulting from an increasing education, I would first like to examine an environmental project launched by the students and teachers at La Pastora school. Located in a coffee growing region of Venezuela, the current school building was previously a coffee processing plant. When the government shut down the coffee plant due to the use of dangerous pesticides that were infecting their water supply, the students and teachers launched a project to study the effects of pesticides on coffee production. Through various tests, they confirmed that the pesticides were actually hurting the coffee plants. The students decided to share this information with others through a community presentation that promoted organic farming. Additionally, this project initiated the planning for a community book that will be titled "The Living Book" to discuss food and nutrition the school's local communities (La Pastora, 1/11/07).

Second, in order to show the promise that education has in overcoming past inequalities found in Venezuela, I will examine the goals of several Mission Sucre students. As previously described, Mission Sucre classes were formed with the intent of training students in the field of social justice. The students in this class emphasized their goals following the completion of their degree. They stated that they do not want to be confined to working in offices. Instead, their goal is actively reach out to those in communities that have not yet been reached by social workers. They viewed their current education as a gift that should be shared with others (1/11/07).

Through observation of the educational revolution in Venezuela, many reforms through Bolivarian schools and missions have been initiated in order to provide Venezuelan children and adults the opportunity to continue their education. Based upon my research, it is evident that educational opportunities are being provided to Venezuelans who were previously denied access to an education. It is also evident that the impact of an education, as predicted by Freire, is helping many Venezuelans to overcome an oppression that has contributed to a past sense of lacking self-worth and confidence. Through programs like La Pastora's stream project and other students' commitment to service following the completion of their education, an increase in education is already improving many Venezuelan societies. Although it is not possible to predict Venezuela's future ability to overcome the past exclusion of its lower classes in society, the previously mentioned factors, gained through an education, support the Venezuelan government's attempt to promote a society based upon equality.

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