

Venezuela:

Op-Ed

By Nalylee Padilla

Bearing witness to history holds both rights and responsibilities. An American student studying abroad carries duties that come alongside any opportunity afforded to them. I travel to a foreign country merely to study what types of political processes are emerging, while the people in that country have difficulty traveling to the neighboring town. I engage in participatory observation to learn the struggles of a population, while that population lives that struggle every day. Finally, I judge and critique one country's institutions while the inhabitants there are just glad to have them at all. And, despite how awkward it may feel to walk into a country with those obvious privileges, it is my right to study wherever I wish to devote my time. However, as with all rights, come responsibilities. Therefore, it is important that I, being fortunate enough to study such a situation, not walk away from that situation once my stay is over.

I have realized, upon returning from Venezuela, that I have done just that: witnessed history in the making. Latin America's history, as turbulent as it has consistently been, has been the site of many a revolution. Be they political, social, economic, or all of those combined, the nations of Latin America have honed the idea of speeding up the process of change via revolution. In this sense, Venezuela is no different. However, in this period of world history, Venezuela is, in actuality, exceptionally different. The country is championing socialist movements during an age where such movements have been declared disruptive to any healthy nation-state. Better yet, the country claims that their form of socialism is different from any that existed before. Unlike the godless socialism of the Russians before them, Venezuelans cite their Christian-like principles as the foundation of their process. And most importantly, Venezuelans will note, their form of socialism involves the active participation of its members- a synthesis between government and the governed that shatters the abusive relationship that has existed between these two groups since the onset of democracy in the nation.

The political scientist in me screamed. There I was, witnessing a country proclaim its role as a democracy (albeit a participatory one) when it clearly violated almost all of the traditional criteria for what, in fact, constitutes a democracy. There clearly existed no civil control of the military. There appeared to be no turnover of power between parties in sight for the near future. Worse yet, it seemed as though one man could potentially be in power for an extended period. Keeping this criterion in mind, I observed and noted the dangerous path Venezuela traveled.

What I was not prepared for was the success with which Venezuela was carrying out its mission for reform. Each day I sat wondering how this system in Venezuela would fail. Yet, each day the system's potential for success reaffirmed itself. Therefore, the task became not trying to find examples of the process functioning, but rather trying to wrap my brain around the fact that it actually *was* functioning. Naturally, a chain of questions flowed through my head. What is wrong with a healthy civil-military union if the military is serving the people? What is wrong with one person being in office for a slightly extended period if that is whom the people genuinely want in office? What is wrong with the popular masses taking back services that were wrongfully reserved for solely the upper class? What is wrong with wanting to *sembrar el petroleo*? This is the form

democracy is taking in Venezuela... and what is wrong with that? That other list of criteria for democracy is the very list that Venezuela is rejecting. So, what is wrong with witnessing a different form of democracy experience success?

Cold War rhetoric taught us that democracy and socialism were two polar opposites that could not exist together. Ideologically, one had to best the other. Since then, democracy has seemingly won the struggle. Yet, here exists Venezuela; a country attempting to meld the two into one political system that will support its lower classes. Therefore, while it has been my privilege and right to witness the dynamic changes that have been happening with this process during my stay, it is now time for me to remember my responsibilities. I must now go and tell people what I have seen, so that they might choose for themselves by either rejecting it, or making a revelation of their own.

Only time will tell what while eventually become of this revolution. However, bearing witness to the process, it is important for us to share what we saw so that someday we might look at what the nation has become and reanalyze our experience there. Perhaps one day when Venezuela has become a gem among South America we might be able to say, "I saw that coming. I saw that nation taking ownership of its destiny." Or perhaps one day when we see Venezuela scrambling to rebuild its shambles of a society we might say, "I saw them doing that to themselves." Either course the country takes, we will be able to reevaluate- knowing that we had the privilege to evaluate in the first place.

Nalylee Padilla, Chavez's Education Initiatives: Indoctrination?

... Presently, Chavez's government has spearheaded a variety of plans to revitalize the public education system within Venezuela. Each of these programs has been met with opposition claiming that the efforts are part of plans to indoctrinate those going through the education system with pro-Chavez, anti-United States sentiments. Responsible for sparking this debate stands Decree 1011 passed in 2000. According to the 2001 World Law Bulletin, the Decree's main aim is to, "provide free quality education and end corruption in public and private school management" (Johnson 4). "The Decree," the Bulletin states, "regulates all aspects of the profession of teaching: instruction, planning, research, experimental education, supervision and administration. It sets forth... a category known as 'national itinerant supervisors,'" (Johnson 4).

It is this group of supervisors that concerned many in the teachers' unions. Those balking at the inclusion of these supervisors within the Decree point to the fact that these people carry with them "wide powers to recommend dismissals" of public school officials who do not prescribe to the "profession's ideological purity," (Venezuela's 1). The government, however, holds firm on its stance that this corps of people is necessary because other supervisors are too ingrained within the old system and therefore turn a blind eye to the corrupt practices surrounding them (Losego 1). Those refuting dissenters of Decree 1011 remind the opposition that Venezuela's Rules and Regulations for the Practice of the Profession of Educator, "establish the principle that, whatever a teacher's political position, promotions will be based exclusively on professional qualifications and on satisfaction of the established excellence requirements," (Respect 1).

While Decree 1011 ignited the fire of controversy, other education reforms kept the fuel burning. In 2001, the Chavez government began planning and implementing a

new round of education reforms collectively known as the National Education Project (PEN). Carlos Lanz, one of the chief framers of the project, has sparked enough opposition himself. Many of those opposed to the course education reforms have taken point at Lanz as one of the problems before even attacking the initiative itself. Lanz's background, the opposition argues, does not speak of someone who should be entrusted with engineering the new state of the public education system. Lanz is, in fact, a retired guerilla who, 30 years ago, could have been found hiding in the mountains, gun in hand (Venezuela's 1). In the 1970's Lanz could have been found in a prison, serving seven years for his role in the three year kidnapping of an American businessman (Venezuela's 1). Admitting his rebellious past, Lanz is, however, quick to explain that, "there is no relationship between the armed struggle of those times and the proposals for educational reform put forward by the current government," (Losego 1).

However, his opponents had qualms with this and the seemingly Bolivarian components as well. Of all the elements of the project, the institution of special Bolivarian schools is enmeshed in much of the indoctrination controversy. Critics claim that the Bolivarian schools are a "partisan political project," (Losego 1). The schools themselves offer eight hours of classes per day, while non Bolivarian schools operate half days only. The schools also incorporate free meals, sports, and medical care within their walls (Losego 1). Opponents are not alarmed by these measures; it is the principles being taught within the Bolivarian schools that are a point of contention.

As mandated by the new constitution laid out by Chavez supporters, all Bolivarian schools are required to teach Bolivarian principles. An UNESCO report completed in 2001 evaluating the Bolivarian schools exemplifies the uniqueness inherent within these schools:

Patriotic symbols have acquired cult status in many of them. Classrooms have their "Bolivarian corners," where the flag, the national anthem and a portrait of the independence leader are displayed. The flag is raised every morning and children are briefed in the classroom on "Bolivarian principles." (Losego 1)

Those in support of the Bolivarian principles being taught within the schools will argue, as Atilio Roso, a music teacher at Republic of Bolivia, a 'Bolivarian' school in west Caracas, does, that, "Much of this is designed to encourage patriotism, which in turn is meant to create citizens who will defend the *patria* (homeland) from whatever may aggrieve it" (Orozco 1). They will also note that the United States employs similar methods because children pledge allegiance to the flag hanging in the corner of the room every morning.

Other points of disagreement regarding the National Education Project surround the ideological slant apparent within the school's curriculum. UNESCO's 2001 report also highlights the pro-Bolivarian ethics instilled in the new curriculum:

The "new revolutionary education model" views globalization as a "colonialist threat ... with serious implications for collective memory and national identity." The project laments that television and computers have "imposed values" in a subtle form of domination and colonization. (Losego 1)

However, those backing the supposed ideological slant claim that the instruction merely serves as a resistance towards hegemony.

Opponents of the 2001 National Education Project also find fault with various other components of the plan. Amongst these is the establishment of "Education

Communities,” which would expand the school’s administration to include not just teachers, principals, and parents (as it did in the past), but to also include members and groups within the local community. Some, however, fear that this will lead to even more pro-Chavez indoctrination, as groups considered friendly with Chavez’s regime will have sway over the school’s decision-making processes (Losego 1). Also worrisome to those critical of the National Education Project is the release of new textbooks which praise Bolivarian principles. History textbooks predominantly for the fourth and sixth grade published in 1999 applaud Chavez’s attempted coup and label Democratic Action and COPEI, the two political parties at the helm of Venezuelan politics since the 1950s, as “corrupt oligarchies,” (Cuban 1). Guillermo Mono, a celebrated Venezuelan historian and teacher, expresses his fears by exclaiming that, “Chavez wants to erase everything that happened between Bolivar and himself,” (Losego 1). Further irritating dissenters to the project is the approval of a national essay contest headlined, “Che Guevara, Example for Youth,” (Losego 1). Finally, the reestablishment of paramilitary classes for high school students that had long been taken off the Ministry of Education’s guidelines has dissenters fuming (Cuban 1). In response to those who equate all of these measures with the government’s intentions of turning the schoolyard into a breeding ground of militant Chavistas, Lanz states:

Their mistake [referring to those opposed to the project] is neutrality. They speak like us about forming citizens, but without recognizing the conflicts, interests and power relationships inherent in society. For those people, there is neither weak nor strong, while we openly take the side of the underprivileged, the oppressed. We have to place ourselves in the context of Venezuela’s revolution, which is about anti-oligarchy and anti-imperialism. Education has to reflect these traits. (Losego 1)

Though Lanz defends his National Education Project, other initiatives taken by the Chavez government to improve the state of education in Venezuela have also been heralded as attempts at indoctrination. Many point to the education link between Cuba and Venezuela as a major point of contention. For example, protests were abundant after 27 Cuban education experts began a “Bolivarian Literacy Campaign” in Venezuela in 2001. Along with this, the fact that roughly 1,600 Venezuelan teachers had already traveled to Cuba to familiarize themselves with the Cuban education system added to the worries (Losego 1). However, in 2003 Missions Robinson I and II and Mission Ribas consolidated the Venezuelan-Cuban education link (Sanchez 16). Missions Robinson I and II employed the award-winning Cuban Literacy method “Yes, I Can.” This method uses audiovisual classes, supervised by facilitators, which teach students how to both read and write in approximately seven weeks (Sanchez 17). Similarly, Mission Ribas, established to aid adults in completing their secondary education, also used the expertise of Cuban specialists (Sanchez 19).

Unfortunately, the use of Cuban education techniques did not go unnoticed and, instead, fueled much concern that Venezuela was attempting to create a Cuban-style form of education indoctrination. However, current Venezuelan Minister of Education and Sports Aritobulo Isturiz points out that Cuban methodology is not being used to spawn any Cuban-Venezuelan indoctrination but rather, because the technique is effective. He explains, “The Cuban methodology has received five awards from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),” (Wagner 1). Isturiz also

clarifies that the method incorporated strictly Venezuelan initiated measures such as using Braille and indigenous languages (Wagner 1). Statistics from the Missions themselves showcase the success of the programs. For example, as of October 30th 2005, Mission Robinson I had graduated a total of 1,482,543 students. Additionally, Mission Robinson I graduated a total of 38,293 students from the indigenous population and another 1,023 from the prison population (Embassy 1). Mission Robinson II saw similar success when nearly 1.2 million students joined the program within a few months of its start on October 28th 2003 (Sanchez 19). As of September 8th 2006, Mission Ribas has officially registered 608,326 students (Embassy 1).

Besides being leery of the Cuban education alliance, those who cite indoctrination also are troubled by the incorporation of the Venezuelan armed forces within the education reforms. Besides the fact that the armed forces have been repairing and rebuilding schools in local communities, some are concerned with how the newer missions such as Robinsons I and II and Ribas have relied on the armed forces. For example, both Missions Robinson I and II incorporated classroom facilitators from the military. Moreover, the military played a crucial role in providing transportation and storage for the various audiovisual equipment needed for the classes such as videos and televisions, as well as simple paper and pencil materials (Sanchez 17). In addition Mission Ribas has gained some disapproval for its reliance on the state oil company PDVSA instead of the Ministry of Education. The mission is, in fact, directed by the Venezuelan Ministry of Energy and Petroleum (Embassy 1). Those supporting this alliance, however, explain that the use of PDVSA is a positive display of the company's focus on providing useful services to the people (Sanchez 19).

Teachers who remain concerned about the indoctrination within the education system despite reassurances often point to how the politicizing of education has affected Venezuela's youth within the system. For example, while at Juan Batista Alberdi Elementary Schools in west Caracas, David Buchbinder of the Christian Science Monitor notices, "Schoolyard brawls in Caracas aren't just about picking on the class nerd anymore. Now they erupt over who's a 'Chavista' and who isn't," (Buchbinder 1). Buchbinder continues:

Until Venezuela's schools revert to the politically neutral places of learning they were before the country's split, schoolchildren have had national politics added to the petty politics that are more typical of an elementary school – who they eat lunch with, what they look like, what kind of clothes they wear. (Buchbinder 1).

Despite all the reasons cited by those who believe Chavez's government has indoctrinated the education system (including Decree 1011, the National Education Project, the Cuban and military reliance, and affects on the children), education within Venezuela has seen improvement from when Hugo Chavez assumed the presidency in 1999. While these successes do not negate the obvious political slant found in the education reforms, it does beg the following question to be asked: Is it worth trying to remove education from the context of the Bolivarian revolution? Perhaps the evaluation can be best summed by those within the system: the adult students, administrators, and youth. Eleonora Dewilliams, a student in Mission Ribas, provides the best evaluation when she says, "Venezuelans need a political education, but [the missions] should be more education than politics. But... you don't bite the hand that feeds you," (Orozco 1). Raymond Romero, director of Mission Ribas at Carmen Maiza School in El Valle parish,

agrees by stating, "I support this mission because it does good, despite all its flaws. I see more pros than cons," (Orozco 1). Finally, Roger Sivira, a nine-year-old at the Bolivarian school Republic of Bolivia in Caracas, answers to those who question the evils of mixing Bolivarian principles within the education system, "There's nothing ugly about defending a people," (Orozco 1). As education systems are intended to do, Venezuela is prepared to educate their children with the roles they want them to assume as adult members of the society.

The Reality Today

Any useful analysis of an education system is ineffectual unless it considers what it means to educate a population. Essentially, to educate is to do what? This question, debated amongst scholars of all disciplines, is central to the evaluation of the degree of indoctrination within Venezuelan schools. Some consider the process of education a vehicle in which, as previously discussed, societies teach their members the skills they will need to be productive contributors in the future. Others may say that to educate is to develop the faculties and capacities of an individual. However, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire directly links education with the liberation of the oppressed.

Under Freire's analysis, education has the capacity to either liberate the oppressed members of a society or to further oppress them into accepting their roles. Freire differentiates between two forms of education: that of the banking concept of education and that of problem-posing education. The banking concept, Freire explains, attempts to further oppress a population by, "transform[ing] students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action," (Freire 77). Freire further outlines this form of education by criticizing the roles it encourages between teachers and students:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (Freire 72).

In considering this, Freire notes that when "unable to use their faculties, people suffer," (Freire 78).

However, Freire poses a necessary alternative to the banking concept of education: that of the problem-posing form of education. This form, central to the liberation of the oppressed, eliminates the barriers between teacher and student, which effectively render the education process counterproductive. Freire explains:

Indeed, problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom... Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (Freire 80).

In today's Venezuela, the usefulness of Freire's problem-posing form of education has already been discovered and employed. Education in Venezuela has adapted to eliminate the banking concept of Venezuelan education utilized in the past, a

system that left many excluded from ever receiving an education and thus, as Freire would assume, developing their faculties that would allow them to free themselves from subjugation. For example, Venezuela's schools have long eliminated the teacher-student complex characteristic of the banking concept. For example, in the Bolivarian school La Pastora, teacher and administrator Zoraida pointed out the fact that the teachers are called by their first name- successfully eliminating from the beginning the hierarchy that sets the teacher above the student. Students at the school also speak of the rights and responsibilities they have in the school system. Many of these students recognize the fact that they would not be going to school had President Chavez's education missions not reached out to them in their rural community. Therefore, they are grateful for the opportunity and respect what the revolution has done for them. For example, when asked about the disciplinary system implemented at the La Pastora school, one student stated:

As a student, I know I have rights and responsibilities. For example, if I'm misbehaving, I know it's my right that the teachers can't hit me. But, I also know when it's time for me to start recognizing my responsibilities. I know when I'm being disruptive in the classroom. I know when I've crossed the line. And when I know I've done that, I know that's it's time for me to start remembering that I'm responsible for contributing to the classroom again (Various).

Similarly, Goya, head of La Zaragoza school, also explained how their school had worked to eliminate this complex. She explained that from the beginning the students and teachers literally built the school together. She too acknowledged that students call their teachers by their first names. Goya was also quick to mention that both students and teachers are responsible for serving as the school's janitors. Both students and teachers, for example, clean the bathrooms side by side (Goya).

Venezuelan schools also work to effectively integrate their learning with service that will help their own impoverished communities. Through problem-posing education, the schools eliminate a teacher lecturing at students and, instead, allow for hands-on, interactive learning. For example, in La Pastora, students studied the pollution in their streams, how it was negatively affecting their community as a whole, and how they could remedy this situation as part of their lab science studies (Various). At La Zaragoza, students took ceramics courses in which they made pottery that they would sell on behalf of the entire community (Goya).

This style of education, however, was in place prior to Chavez's assumption of the presidency. Goya (of La Zaragoza school) noted that Chavez did not create this style of education. She said education had been developing in this way at least a decade before the Bolivarian government took office. She stated that Chavez is merely doing what he saw communities were already doing on their own (Goya). Her own school, La Zaragoza, remains an example. A non-Bolivarian school, La Zaragoza now serves as a model for the newer Bolivarian schools that are forming all throughout the nation. When asked about the question of indoctrination in schools, Goya responded:

Look, you have to understand that these things were going on before Chavez. The government uses our school as a model for the new Bolivarian schools. So how could the new government be responsible for indoctrinating schools? If anything, we must have indoctrinated them ourselves then! The way we teach history now just allows us to challenge what was in the books. We can teach our history now, not just the history of those that oppressed us (Goya).

Goya was also adamant about pointing out the fact that many of the aspects of their education systems that are being criticized as indoctrination are also present in education systems through the United States. For example, when participating in an art project with a group of 12 children in the rural town of Monte Carmelo, there were clear trends in the subject matter each child drew. Each child was allowed to draw whatever they wanted. Eight of the twelve students drew the Venezuelan flag in their portrait. This point simply illustrates that children are proud of their country and identify with it. This form of nationalism, however, is accepted and encouraged in the United States. However, when done by Venezuelan children it is accused of being an attempt at indoctrinating them to support the current movements initiated by the Bolivarian government (Monte Carmelo).

Conclusion

While some fear that education within Venezuela represents indoctrination, the reality remains that the pro-Chavez government has successfully incorporated education within the Bolivarian movement of participatory democracy. Both youth and adults are taking advantage of the new education initiatives. In fact, because opportunities to educate oneself are so widely available, Venezuelans believe that those not studying are merely lazy and unwilling to productively contribute to their communities. Rather than indoctrinate the population within the nation, the new ways in which education has manifested itself within Venezuela allow the oppressed to take charge of their own society. Freire warns that, “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression,” (Freire 78). In Venezuela, education has changed from this former form of domination to one of committed involvement. People are not indoctrinated; they are merely taking pride in the fact that they have finally constructed for themselves what it means to be a Venezuelan.

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