

Cuba's Academic Advantage: Why Students in Cuba do Better in School by Martin Carnoy, with Amber K. Gove and Jeffery H. Marshall. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007. 209 pp. ISBN 0-8047-5598-1.

It is difficult to find current research on the Cuban educational system that moves beyond the anecdotal. Furthermore, the little material on Cuba available in English, especially if written in the United States, tends to come from either extreme of a highly polarized ideological spectrum, which either unfairly romanticizes or demonizes the realities of our island neighbor. In this book Martin Carnoy draws on existing international test data, complemented by field research and interviews, to inform readers about what is actually happening in Cuban elementary schools. He does this without trying to make up our minds about the Cuban political system, making it a valuable contribution to anyone interested in this field of study.

Although Cuba is the main subject of this book, Carnoy's study employs comparative research that examines not only the Cuban educational system, but the Chilean and Brazilian systems as well, rewarding readers with insightful analysis and critique of all three systems. The investigation begins with the results of the 1997-1998 UNESCO-sponsored Laboratorio international exam and survey which compared math and language educational outcomes of fourth-graders in 13 Latin American countries and quantitatively revealed what many experts had long suspected, that the Cuban educational system performs well above other countries in the region. The book attempts to explain this phenomenon using a mixed-methods approach that includes four strategies: statistical estimations based on production functions using the exam and survey data; synthesis of interviews with school teachers, administrators, students, families, and ministry of education officials at all levels; a review of mathematics textbooks and curriculum; and the results of videotaping and coding actual math instruction in classrooms.

The author describes his methodology without attempting to hide any of the shortcomings in the different data sources; he openly discusses some of the potential problems with the Laboratorio results and the limitations due to the restricted number of classroom observations. Still, the triangulation available from the multiple approaches' complementing results creates convincing answers to the basic question posed in this book. By sticking to a more rigorous data-driven analysis of the education systems under scrutiny, we lose some of the personal dimensions of life in Cuban, Brazilian, and Chilean schools. This reflects part of the stated mission of the book; Carnoy admits that although it might be "technical and boring" at times, this approach is necessary to get away from the simple "he said, she said" aspect of research. Because of the text's clear language and logical layout, readers not interested in or not capable of understanding some aspects of Carnoy's methodology, especially the chapter dealing with statistical

manipulations of test and survey data, may simply skip those sections of the book without failing to see how he reaches his conclusions or benefiting from the general analysis.

So why do students in Cuba do better in school? Carnoy sums it up succinctly in the conclusion:

The answer turns out to be fairly straightforward: Cuban children attend schools that are intensely focused on instruction and are staffed by well-trained, regularly supervised teachers in a social environment that is dedicated to high academic achievement for all social groups. Combining high-quality teaching with high academic expectations and a tightly controlled school management hierarchy with well-defined goals is what makes the Cuban system tick. It distinguishes Cuban education from other systems in Latin America. In essence, Cuban education gives most Cuban pupils primary education that only upper-middle-class children receive in other Latin American countries. (p. 141)

In addition, Cuba benefits from two generations of sustained school investment, which has created a virtuous cycle, in which better-educated students lead to better-educated teachers. Due to the relatively high status of teachers in Cuba and reduced market incentives to seek higher pay, Cuban schools can attract and retain the best and brightest into teaching. This contributes to lower teacher absenteeism in Cuba, a phenomenon rampant throughout most other Latin American countries, especially in the rural sectors. Cuban parents have higher levels of education and, due to the generally controlled nature of employment and housing, fewer families move or change their children from school to school. Teacher training in Cuba is directly linked to the implementation of a national curriculum, and new teachers are regularly checked to ensure student exposure to all components of this curriculum. Chilean and Brazilian textbooks cover more material than Cuban textbooks, but teachers in Brazil and Chile have often failed to expose schoolchildren to much of this material. Expanding on the notion of social capital popularized in James Coleman's influential 1966 report on education, Carnoy attributes some of the systematic differences observed between Cuba, Chile, and Brazil to State-Generated Social Capital. That is, Carnoy argues that states can take active measures to cultivate networks and access to public resources within their populations, which pay dividends when it comes to educational outcomes.

Carnoy's analysis explores the irony that Cuban schools act more like profit-maximizing firms, where the profit is student learning, than do their Brazilian and Chilean counterparts. Cuban schools do more to monitor the actual production of student learning, while Brazilian and Chilean schools for the most part have refused to interfere with the autonomy of the teachers in their

classrooms, and rely on indirect market mechanisms to try to nudge their schools towards equity and achievement goals.

Carnoy takes a pragmatic look at the realities of what democratic market freedoms mean to many of the inhabitants of Latin America. Choices available to many families include allowing their children to work outside of the home, failing to invest in their children's health, allowing children to miss school, and allowing children to roam the street or join gangs. All of these options, unavailable to families in Cuba, hurt many children's academic opportunities throughout Latin America, especially among the poor. Carnoy challenges readers to consider that many times the lack of choices in Cuba, which may produce detrimental effects in the realms of economics or politics, often translates into the inability of families to make poor choices for their children's educational careers.

This book is not Carnoy's first contribution on Cuban education; he has periodically examined this subject throughout his career. In his previous major academic contribution, a book chapter in the 1990 compilation *Education and Social Transition in the Third World*, Carnoy dealt more extensively with issues of ideology and examined data relating to school enrollment rates. His 2007 work deals more directly with issues of school quality. This shift in attention reflects a more general trend as the field of education has continued to mature during the past two decades, moving away from a more basic focus on the expansion of education systems—i.e., privileging simple enrollment rates—to a more sophisticated approach focusing on issues of educational quality and what students actually learn while in school.

Carnoy closes his book conscious of the particularities and many non-transferable aspects of the Cuban educational experience by clearly outlining lessons from Cuba other countries should consider—not only poor countries or those we typically identify as developing countries, but lessons any country, and especially Brazil and Chile, or the United States, could benefit from. These lessons include: “State-generated social capital matters” (page 143); “curriculum matters, but its implementation depends on teacher capacity” (page 146); “teacher education needs to be tightly coordinated with existing curriculum, this does not occur spontaneously” (page 148); and “instructional leadership and supervision is key to improving instruction, market incentives are no substitute for good management” (p. 151).

References

Carnoy, M., & Samoff, J. (1990). *Education and Social Transition in the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Reviewer

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