

# Preparing citizens for a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism: Venezuela's Bolivarian Educational reforms

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the contemporary expansion of mass school education in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela under the Presidency of Hugo Chávez, in terms of the commitment to extend access to formerly excluded sectors of society, and to explicitly prepare new socialist citizens required to consolidate the Bolivarian socialist republic under construction. These themes are developed through an analysis of policy documents and interviews with Education academics, set in the broader political program advocating a "Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas", its historical roots, and efforts to develop a "socialism for the twenty-first century".

A more detailed evaluation of the explicit political goals of Venezuela's educational reforms follows, and tensions within and between these goals. In particular, we investigate the tensions between: 1) a centralised political and educational project and calls for local "democratic and protagonistic" participation in school organisation and curricula; 2) the nationalistic character of the Chávez's politics and the regional element promoting Latin American integration (in the spirit of Bolivar); and 3) the envisaged formation of new socialist citizens via curricular and pedagogical reforms and the response of the existing teaching profession.

This paper concludes by outlining the potential contribution of a universal, accessible and equitable system of critical education to Venezuela's socialist project, and to broader (regional and international) attempts to prepare citizens as contributors to the construction of a more just, equitable and democratic world-system. Resolving the identified tensions in ways that maintain and further develop popular support for the political project is seen as critical to realising this potential.

## **Preparing citizens for a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism?: Venezuela's Bolivarian Educational reforms**

### **Introduction:**

Following the re-election of President Hugo Chávez to a second term in December 2006, Venezuela's 'Bolivarian, socialist revolution' is accelerating with education taking on an increasingly high profile in the project to define and construct a viable socialism for the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Education and Sport (MED), renamed Ministry of Popular Power for Education (MPPE), now led by the President's brother Adán Chávez, is quite unambiguous about the political function of universal education, recently affirming that "the transformation of the education system is inextricably linked to the construction of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (MPPE, 2007). Non-formal education missions have been institutionalised to provide Adult education, while the public education system is being simultaneously expanded and reconstructed as the comprehensive, integral Bolivarian system for all.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on equity through meaningful expanded access is now accompanied by exhortations to strengthen the socialist character of the expansion such that the system "privileges solidarity, the common and collective good, to give real substance to 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism" (MPPE, 2007).

These declarations follow the naming of education as one of five key "motors" to "kick start" the socialist revolution in The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) in January 2007, under the banner of "Lights and Morals: Education with socialist values" and much public discourse about popular education "in all places, at all times" (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información, MPPCI, 2007). Debate over a revised "Organic Education Law" is set to continue in September 2007 in Venezuela's national parliament, aiming to conclude the process by year's end (Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, ABN, 2007), while new curricula for primary and secondary schools are under development, and programs to prepare teachers for the Bolivarian system continue.

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<sup>1</sup> The election victory in December 2006 built on Chávez's earlier election wins in 1999 and 2000, and victory in the recall referendum of 2004, and marks the highest level of popular support so far, with the vote for Chávez growing steadily over this period. With the political project being disrupted since 2000 due to organised opposition (see foot note 3 below), the public rhetoric since December 2006 has been consistently on kick starting, and quickly deepening and extending the socialist nature of the project.

Hence the early announcement of the "Five Motors" of the "Bolivarian Socialist Revolution" to achieve this outcome (see <http://www.minci.gob.ve/motores/62/11852>): 1) "Enabling Law: Direct route to socialism", passed by the National Assembly in January 2007 giving Chávez power to rule in certain areas by decree for 18 months (see Wilpert, 2007b); 2) "Constitutional Reform: A State of Socialist Rights / Laws" – a Presidential commission established to oversee the reform of the curriculum in line with the socialist project; 3) "Lights and Morals: Education with socialist values" – the deepening of the educational reform in line with popular education principles; 4) "The New Geometry of power: Socialist reordering of the geopolitical structure of the nation" – reform of existing structures and divisions of power between national, state and local branches of government; and 5) "Explosion of Local / Communal power: Protagonistic, Democratic, Socialist Democracy" – the creation of local level popular councils, and transfer of decision making power (and accompanying control over some finances) to these units.

At the time of writing (August 2007), President Chávez had recently announced proposed changes to 34 articles of the Constitution, subject to popular and parliamentary debate, and ultimately a referendum.

<sup>2</sup> The Bolivarian model seeks to universalise access to education from child-care (0-6) through to the undergraduate University level (see MED, 2006e).

These developments in education form part of the broad Bolivarian program implemented since 1999, including a radically independent foreign policy promoting Latin American unity via a *Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas* (ALBA) promoting international trade based on principles of solidarity, cooperative advantage and more equitable exchange (Ministro de Estado para la Integración y Comercio Exterior, MEICE, 2004). Venezuela has recently paid off its debt to the World Bank and withdrawn from both the World Bank and IMF, and helped other countries in Latin America pay off their debt. At the same time President Chávez has been actively promoting ALBA and a new “Bank of the South” (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Venezuela are current members) as alternative structures to support Latin American integration and development, under very different terms to those imposed by the World Bank and IMF (Carlson, 2007; Zibechi, 2007). Domestic reforms have included a range of extraordinary social missions (*misiones*) seeking to definitively address the sharp social inequalities inherited by Chávez, part of what is referred to as the historical social debt (*deuda social*). More recently, Venezuela has re-nationalised strategic sectors of the economy (electricity, telephone, oil refining) not through radical expropriations, but radical rhetoric followed by the negotiated purchase of majority ownership by the Venezuelan State (Ingham, 2007; Kozloff, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

As the world’s fifth largest oil producer, the BRV’s income from its extensive oil reserves, at a time of heightened oil prices, has clearly been decisive in the success of the Bolivarian project to date (Mather, 2006). This reliance on oil revenue, as tax or direct income from nationalised oil companies, is a key theme in Venezuela’s history, explored by Ellner and Hellinger (2004) who detail the struggle to move from an “extractive” economic model of oil-export driven growth or decline, to one capable of withstanding changes in international commodity prices. They argue that the failure of President Andrés Pérez to achieve this during the oil boom of the 1970s, following the nationalisation of the oil industry under the Caldera government in 1973, contributed to increased levels of foreign debt and cuts in public expenditure in the 1980s when oil prices fell, and the adoption of an orthodox IMF austerity programme under a newly elected Perez government in 1989. The consequent social upheaval and protests of 1989, the *Caracazo*, helped set the conditions for the breakdown of the traditional party system established in the 1958 “pact of punto fijo,” and rise of Hugo Chávez (see Gott, 2005, pp. 49-56).<sup>4</sup>

Whether the Bolivarian model of endogenous, socialist development is able to break with the extractive economic model remains to be seen. As might be predicted, polarised debate within and

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<sup>3</sup> In advancing such a radical alternative to the so-called “Washington consensus” and neoliberal prescriptions for national development, Chávez has confronted significant organised internal and external opposition to his Bolivarian revolution (Niemeyer, 2004). Most dramatically, since taking office in 1999 he was ousted by a military coup d’état in April 2002, but returned to power by popular pressure both within the military and civil society, after just two days in detention. This was followed by: a ten week strike by oil workers in the State owned PdVSA oil company beginning in December 2002; a recall referendum won by Chávez in August 2004 (with a vote of almost 60%) (see Golinger, 2006; Gott, 2005; Harnecker, 2004). The extraordinary nature of the social missions, in large part a response to bureaucratic obstacles to the reform agenda, is testimony to the difficulty experienced by Chávez in advancing such a project in the current world context (see for example Raby, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The Pact of Punto Fijo was essentially an agreement for power sharing amongst the major, established political parties, following the return to political democracy in 1958. The party system that ensued is referred to as *puntofijismo*, and is integral to the populist, anti-party nature of Hugo Chávez’s rise to power.

outside Venezuela grows, alongside heightened interest and expectations amongst the international left.<sup>5</sup> Richard Gott's (2005) historical account of Chávez conclude that Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution represents a possible future for Latin America, a genuine alternative to globalisation and neo-liberalism (p. 273). Similarly, Tariq Ali (2006a) refers to "the Caracas effect", citing an end to Cuba's isolation in the region, the recent defeat of the Bolivian Oligarchy with the election of Evo Morales, and the "central role" of Venezuela under Chávez "mobilizing popular anti-neoliberal movements in virtually every Latin American country" (p. 5). His most recent volume, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, expands on the theme (Ali, 2006b). Chomsky (2006) adds that Venezuela's support for countries seeking to free themselves of IMF and World Bank influence as having helped to weaken the U.S economic weapon over the region.

Venezuela's rapid expansion of education, in line with UN Education for All (EFA) objectives (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2004), thus takes on particular interest in the broad field of citizenship education, through the explicit agenda of preparing citizens for a model of participatory and protagonistic, socialist democracy. This paper reviews the background of the current educational reforms in the BRV, and working from some of the major policy documents and interviews with Education academics, elaborates two themes currently at play. First, outcomes of heightened empowerment, and expressions of "citizenship rights", are considered as consequences of the educational expansion and broader political project to date, indirectly contributing to a new or renewed sense of national citizenship and participation. Second, some predictable difficulties and tensions in the official efforts to use education to instil socialist values in students are explored. We conclude by reflecting on the overtly politicised nature of the educational reforms in the BRV, effectively making all education, overtly, about citizenship formation, and the possible trajectories of this project.

## Interviews

In January 2007 the author spent three weeks in Caracas as the initial stage of future, extended fieldwork researching the Bolivarian educational project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven senior education academics in Caracas, seeking their views and interpretations of the educational reforms to date from the perspectives of access and expansion, equity, and the intended socialisation of citizens for the Bolivarian project.<sup>6</sup> The author was in Caracas as the "five motors" of the Bolivarian socialist revolution were announced, including the educational motor of *Morals y Luces* for socialist values (see below). First name pseudonyms, and broad reference to their academic level are used for each of the interviewees to maintain their anonymity. Two of the seven interviewees described themselves as "anti-Chavistas" (Francisco and José), one as a "Chavista" (Ramón), and the remaining four critical supporters of the Bolivarian project (Marlene, María, Daniel and Julio).

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<sup>5</sup> This polarisation reached heightened levels in response to the recent non-renewal of the commercial television station's (RCTV) concession, which had played an active role in the 2002 failed coup against the government, and its replacement with a public broadcasting station (for the standard 'end of free speech' line, see The Economist, 2007; for a more balanced and critical account, see Wilpert, 2007a, pp. 223-226; Wilpert, 2007b).

<sup>6</sup> Approval to conduct interviews was granted by the University of Newcastle, Australia, Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-330-1106.

## **Bolivarian, socialist (citizenship) education for all**

The Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic, ratified in 2000 and currently under review to institutionalize the socialist project (see footnote 1), was a central feature of Chávez's 1998 election campaign. The campaign, and specific sections of the subsequent Constitution, included commitments to the concept of education for all, as a human right in a democratic society. Fourteen articles of the Constitution deal with "Cultural and educational rights", article 102 stating that "Education is a fundamental human right and social obligation which is free, obligatory and democratic" (Gaceta Oficial de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2000, p. 103). Article 103 goes on to affirm that "everyone has a right to comprehensive, quality, ongoing education, under equal conditions for equal opportunities, regardless of their abilities, aspirations or vocation" (p. 103). Writing the prologue to a 2004 Report on Venezuela's progress on the UN Millennium Goals, President Chávez cites the Constitution as marking the transition from a "representative" to a "participatory and protagonistic democracy", in which rights to "health, housing, education, work, political participation, amongst others, are inalienable rights of all Venezuelans, surpassing the old conception of approaching social problems from a position of charity or social assistance" (in República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2004, p. 11).

These political commitments have been perhaps most dramatically applied in a series of social "missions" established to deliver a range of services to the most marginalised or excluded sectors of Venezuelan society (see Gott, 2005, pp. 256-59; Sánchez, 2005). Four non-formal educational programs (Mission Robinson I & II, Ribas and Sucre) were initially established to provide first literacy, and then primary, secondary and ultimately University education respectively for adults who were previously excluded from accessing education.<sup>7</sup> With respect to school education, the new government faced dramatic falls in retention rates throughout the school system, with only around 50% staying on until 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 30% to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and around 15% or less to Year 11 (MED, 2004, p. 16). In response to these outcomes, and the historical legacy of the exclusion of sections of society from schooling (the poor and the nation's Indigenous peoples), President Chávez abolished the matriculation fee in public schools, initiated the provision of meals for students in school, improved transport, provided scholarships, and lifted public investment in education from below 3% of GDP to 6.1% in 2004 (p. 17). The Ministry also reported an increased participation rates in schooling from 59.14% in 1998 to 67% in 2002 (MED, 2004, p. 17).

According to Gomez (2004), by 2004 some 675 new schools had been constructed, a further 2,250 schools had undergone significant renovations, and more than 35,000 additional teachers had been employed. In the politically charged climate of the BRV, debate over the extent of the educational

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<sup>7</sup> Mission Robinson drew directly on Cuba's successful literacy campaign of 1961, with the materials *Yo Sí Puedo* (Yes I Can) being used to teach approximately 1.4 million Venezuelan adults to read and write by 2005 (MED, 2006a, 2006c). The educational missions are complemented with a range of social programs that address socio-economic barriers to access to, and opportunities within, schooling, such as *Misión Mercal* providing subsidised food through a network of shops and food kitchens. In addition, Sánchez (2005) cites 400,000 scholarships being created for the poorest students (200,000 in *Mission Robinson II* and 100,000 each in *Mission Ribas* and *Sucre*), amounting to 70% of minimum wage (\$100 / month) (p. 20).

reforms, and their success, continues. Bravo Jáuregui (2006), for example, argues that the results have been exaggerated, and that contrary to the government rhetoric the emphasis has been on expanding professional and tertiary education, driven by conventional human capital logic, though even he acknowledges increased enrolments at all levels of schooling, and increased expenditure on education both per capital and as a percentage of GDP (pp. 91-93).<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent expansion of education in the BRV has increasingly taken on an explicit political character beyond the politics of providing equitable and high quality EFA, to overt goals of socialising citizens for the national political project of developing a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism. As indicated above, the call for schooling to instil socialist values for this project has sharpened since Chávez's re-election in 2006, but this has built on a consistent acknowledgement of the political nature of any system of mass education. Vice-President José Vicente Rangel for example, noted at the World Education Forum held in Caracas that:

We are trying to introduce politics, to replace the politics that others have introduced, because we understand that education is not neutral. Education is a commitment: a commitment to reaction and the right, or a commitment to the revolution; a commitment with the empire or with national sovereignty; a commitment to that represented by Bush and Manuel Rosales, or that represented by Hugo Chávez Frías (ABN, 2006d).

Similarly, the former Education Minister Aristóbulo Istúriz frequently referred to the policy of socialising citizens for the new Bolivarian Republic, concluding that "we must be conscious of the educational model that will facilitate the formation of this type of republican, and together construct such a model" (cited in Bolognini, 2006).

In this context, the immediate question is what is the content of the 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism being advanced in the BRV, and what is envisaged for schools to prepare citizens for this project.

Introducing the conceptual, philosophical and legal basis of the Bolivarian school system that is central to the current expansion and reform of mass education, the Ministry of Education and Sport reports:

"The school must be a space where the social actors that have formerly been excluded are able to intervene in the social life of citizens, in the construction of a nation built on dialogue and the recognition of the political, social, economic and cultural rights of all. The forms and languages of the majority and the minorities must also be protagonists in the public sphere ... The process we are undertaking is the movement from representative democracy to an authentic "participatory-protagonistic" democracy; for that it is essential that we talk about action in the recognition and integration of diversity" (MED, 2006a, p. 13).

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<sup>8</sup> Bravo Jáuregui's (2006) book appears to suffer from some fundamental flaws in relation to the use of statistics. For example, at one point he argues that the government is giving priority to professional secondary education over the comprehensive (diversified) sector, since the former increased by 112.5% over 1999-2004 compared with 36% for the comprehensive sector. The table reporting this, however, shows that the numbers in the comprehensive sector began from a much larger base, such that it's numbers increased by around 169,000 students, compared to 36,200 in the professional sector. Data on the two types, as a percentage of the sector, do show a decline in comprehensive from 92 to 88%, and a corresponding increase in professional from 8 to 12%, but this makes the argument that professional education is a significantly higher priority for the government difficult to sustain. For a more polemical, anti-Chavista view of education see Bravo Jáuregui's weekly blog posts at: <http://memoriaeducatvav.blogspot.com>

The emphasis here on recognising and meaningfully including diversity within social institutions like schooling, and their reconstruction, emerges, at the policy level, as a central feature of the Bolivarian school system. Further, the new / reformed system is said to be “democratic, participatory, protagonistic, multiethnic and multicultural, [one] that provides a comprehensive preparation for boys, girls and adolescents without any type of discrimination ... [and] constructs new citizens” (MED, 2006a, p. 23). Part of the official policy here is for schooling itself to be democratised, in line with the broader political project of socialist participatory and protagonistic democracy, thus allowing for direct community participation in the school. This practice of democracy in schools thus appears to be a strategic part of students’ preparation for the exercise of this model of socialist democracy beyond the school, perhaps in contrast to other historical models which relied more on students formally and uncritically receiving a revised curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

Since December 2006, as the “third motor” of the Bolivarian socialist revolution, the Bolivarian Schools have been repeatedly called on to instil socialist values in students across all education sectors. A government publication describing the “Third motor of Lights and Morals: Education with socialist values” is made up of a series of quotes from President Chávez, with multiple references to Che Guevara’s reflections on education, making a case for a concept of “popular education, at all times in all places” in which the population is constantly reading, studying, and critically reflecting on their studies and their world (MPPCI, 2007). Here again the unavoidably political nature of the reformed system is acknowledged in terms of making this implicit feature of any system of mass education explicit, in the case of the BRV this being socialisation for the Bolivarian political project being advanced. This view is succinctly expressed by the current Minister of Popular Power for Education, Adán Chávez, who recently observed:

In general terms, the curriculum reform must be linked to the construction of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is nothing to fear in this, because we are transforming a system based in education for egotism, individualism, and ultimately in savage capitalism. This was the old educational system, the capitalist ideology. We are constructing a socialist ideology: education based on the values of an authentic society that is teaching people to live and work for the collective and unity. There is no doubt that this is the battle of ideas (MPPCI, 2007).

Comment [OU1]:

With a fresh mandate under the election slogan of building 21<sup>st</sup> Century socialism, President Chávez can confidently argue that the socialist values required to carry through this project must be developed through education. In calling for a model of popular, critical education, he cites Che Guevara’s opposition to any *formalismo* in the promotion of these values (cited in MPPCI, 2007).<sup>10</sup> In the words

<sup>9</sup> Just as other aspects of the Bolivarian socialist project have met strong opposition amongst some sectors of society, the overtly political nature of the educational project polarises on several fronts. Claims that education is being “Cubanised” to uncritically indoctrinate students in support of a Cuban style model of communism continue, alongside concerns at the strengthening of public over private education, linked to fears that private, and particularly faith-based schools will be closed and replaced with a secular, Bolivarian system (see for example Losego, 2001; MPPE, 2007; The Economist, 2005). Bravo Jáuregui argues, somewhat simplistically, that the expansion of education is driven simply to support the continuous re-election of President Chávez (see <http://memoriaeducatvav.blogspot.com>).

<sup>10</sup> The critique of formalism, and the uncritical rote-learning of alternative socialist curricula, was emphasised in Cuba prior to the substantive shift towards Soviet alignment in the early 1970s (see Blanco, 1995a, 1995b; Marí

of Marlene, a critical but non-aligned supporter of the Bolivarian process, this is important political work, “not because we read a party political manual, but because in essence, the act of teaching people to think, to understand, to create, is subversive”.

How Venezuela constructs a model of State provided education for all based in principles of popular education, and producing critical thinkers committed to and prepared to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism, and underlying this of course what 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism constitutes (see Wilpert, 2007a, pp. 237-266), is the crucial, open question to be answered in the years ahead. In terms of citizenship, it is apparent that the entire system is expected to deliver the range of outcomes being sought, through the content and practice of formal schooling (and the non-formal missions) at all levels. The following outlines just two broad themes, drawn from educational actors in the field: first, an emerging outcome of increased inclusion and social empowerment linked to the educational reforms; and second, a major obstacle to the expressed socialist citizenship goals in the form of teacher resistance to change, both generally and the politics of the reform in particular.

**[Something on comparative ed here? – world culture of mass education for national citizenship, playing out in a particular way in the BRV context, but with fairly conventional results to date...]**

### **Bolivarian schooling and social / civic empowerment**

As noted above, the BRV's expansion and reform of schooling is underscored by a Constitutional and political commitment to education for all as a human right, necessary to the realisation of other social, economic and political rights, in accordance with UN goals (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2004). Several education academics interviewed argued that they were seeing a broad impact on the general culture, in terms of a renewed valuing of education and its accessibility, as a result of both the non-formal educational missions and the measures to expand access to public schooling. Marlene, an academic and former senior figure in the Ministry of Culture, emphasised that sections of society who had effectively given up on the idea of formal education were now enthusiastically undertaking study via the missions and the developing Bolivarian school system, in the process demonstrating a renewed or reinvigorated desire to undertake basic / further education.<sup>11</sup> She commented:

It seems to me that the most important change that we can observe is at the level of the collective imagination, that is that people in general have re-vindicated their right to study. For me this is the most significant achievement of this government, or of this process ... This process has led people to assume that education is possible for everyone. That is, that the idea of education for all has been internalised by the people is, for me, something very important.

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Lois, 1995; Martínez Heredia, 1995a, 1995b). Ironically, by endorsing this critique, Chávez is arguably addressing criticism from the Left of the subsequent model developed in Cuba.

<sup>11</sup> The most apparent barrier to inclusion has been socioeconomic, though arguably the nature of the Venezuelan economy, with the large informal sector in which formal credentials are not required, has discouraged even some who may have had the capacity to access formal education attain formal credentials. Reasons for people taking up the new opportunities are no doubt as varied as they are in any context, but given the context and the extent and pace of the expansion, this is worthy of further research.

María outlined similar responses, clearly attributing this to the generalised expansion of educational opportunities:

I think this has been the most important. Never before in Venezuela have there been so many opportunities for the poor, or the excluded sectors of society, to access education in all its levels, including University. This is the most important policy, the policy of inclusion, because they have opened many options with distinct modes and forms. That is to say, today any Venezuelan that wants to study can do so, without any type of limitation.

She elaborated on this dimension of the reforms, highlighting the immeasurable impact on popular human dignity amongst the sections of the population effectively excluded from social and political life pre-Chávez.<sup>12</sup> This she articulates in terms of a renewed sense of citizenship, whereby participation in education is linked to a sense of people feeling "included", to the point that they felt as though they were truly "citizens" for the first time:

This has meant a lift in people's sense of human dignity, and this is something that can't be measured. The dignity this has given to the poor and the excluded is priceless ... Maybe the students aren't the greatest, but for the first time they feel like people ... Now they have something that no previous government has given them, the right to be citizens.

These insights suggest that outcomes of renewing people's sense of identity, inclusion, citizenship, their belief in their capacity to study and readiness to demand access to education as a right (in line with the official discourse), are significant outcomes of the educational expansion to date.<sup>13</sup> Some of the participants argued that this, in conjunction with other reforms, was contributing to a qualitatively new and heightened sense of "empowerment" of those excluded sectors. Marlene, for example, refers to the generalised politicisation of society under Chávez, but does so in terms of the inclusion or reincorporation of those left out under the Fourth Republic. The level of empowerment and participation she describes may fall short of the participatory and protagonistic vision of the Bolivarian revolution, but it does make the point that larger numbers of people are more consciously engaged with political life in the Bolivarian process:

Nowadays everyone has an opinion for or against. It wasn't like this before. This political process has rescued the political condition, above all in the least favoured sectors. That is, the entire Venezuelan society now argues, expresses an opinion for or against I don't know what. This is some achievement, because before it was as if we were asleep. A few of us argued, but it was as if we were oddities, whereas now, if you go to the shop to buy something you are in a debate ... With respect to rescuing the collective view that the people have the right to an opinion and to protest, they have also inscribed the right to education: 'I have the right!'; 'Yes I can!'; this is very important.

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<sup>12</sup> It is this large cohort that make up the core of President Chávez's popular support (see Ali, 2006b; Ellner & Hellinger, 2004; Gott, 2005; Kozloff, 2007; Wilpert, 2007a).

<sup>13</sup> The consistent and growing level of popular support for Chávez, evident in the Presidential election and Recall Referendum results, suggest the political program of the Bolivarian revolution, including educational expansion, are having an impact.

María argues that the sense of empowerment is evident in what we might call an general sense of civic entitlement, whereby those accessing public services like education for the first time have quickly assimilated the concept of seeing these services as a basic right, and therefore are demanding that they be adequately provided and resourced. She describes this as an adoption and expression of "citizenship rights":

There is a strong ideology that has deeply penetrated students through these expanded services, whereby they have recalculated their citizenship rights. At times the students go overboard ... They protest for everything, 'I don't have a pen, I don't have this...' They have internalised the theme of participation and of their citizenship rights, such that now they demand everything. Clearly it wasn't like this before.

The Bolivarian Revolution is repeatedly expressed in terms of definitive response to a long history of oppression, social exclusion, and exploitation by Colonial powers; and since independence, corruption and corporate power, including neo-imperialism of the United States in the region. This aspect of the Bolivarian process aligns closely with Raby's (2006) analysis of the importance of such connections in populist leaders, noting Venezuela's "national-popular discourse" that has allowed Chávez to improve popular welfare but also "confront national and transnational capital, yet without provoking a catastrophic rupture and consequent international isolation" (p. 262). Thus the expansion of education, like that of public health services, housing, nationalisations of key or strategic industries, emerge in this climate and are explicitly set in terms of a government's program to definitively overcome the inherited social debt of the country.

### **Bolivarian schooling for socialist values: changing teachers' practice?**

As with any substantial reform, the uneven application of official policy in practice was highlighted by those interviewed, citing generalised inertia amongst the teaching profession, coupled with judgements that a significant section of the teaching profession is directly and / or actively opposed to the reforms. This opposition ranges from those opposing the structural move towards a universal model of an extended, single session of integral schooling, including integrated curriculum projects, to those opposing the broader political project (anti-Chavistas) and / or the overt, politicised objectives of the Bolivarian system. Ramón, for example, noted:

The exercise of democracy in the school, and the preparation of citizens in school for the deepening of their democratic participation beyond the school, is still something far from being achieved. I think that this is only happening, in an authentic way, in a few centres. In a few places it is happening in practice, not from militants in the revolutionary process, but in the practice of teachers committed to their work, and in some other cases in the conscious practice of teachers committed to the process.

Overcoming obstacles to the deep political objectives of the new system are at the heart of the process currently. Julio, a long standing Professor of Education, succinctly articulates the scope of this barrier as follows:

Lets call the whole system, from pre-school to University, the school. The school currently does not function in harmony with the changes taking place in Venezuela. I would argue that the majority, including in the public school, the majority are diffusing values contrary to the national project.

He goes on to cite a number of factors characterising the existing profession that work against the new conception of schooling, and teachers' promotion of the new 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist values, including the physical condition of schools and their resources, in a system isolated from the community, with teachers primarily motivated to receive a salary.

The comparative work of Myers (2007) is of interest here, investigating the practices of politically active teachers in the contexts of Brazil and Canada. One of his conclusions was that activist teachers' more readily acknowledged the political nature of their work, and for activist teachers, "education was a political activity and a social

With respect to teachers' implementation of the new policies, some cited the politically conservative nature of the profession in general, and hence the need for more teachers with a political commitment to the Bolivarian system and broader political project if the qualitative change is to succeed. Ramón, for example, elaborated the need for government officials and education academics themselves to reflect on their own pedagogical conservatism when trying to interpret and apply the changes, if they were to be successful in producing teachers committed to the new model:

No reform or innovation is possible without the conscious, and dedicated participation of teachers. In this regard I think we have not responded sufficiently ... There is a lot of conservatism within us, and I think in many cases this extends to our revolutionary cadre. I can't come and deliver a speech, and with this convince you. You don't convince people with speeches. You do it with other things, but not with speeches, and often we make this mistake...

Julio adds that teachers were subject to pressures from their family to maintain their job, and from their colleagues to not to rock the boat, thus working against any innovative practice. Interestingly, Daniel adds that that many amongst the existing cadre of politically conscious teachers committed to the Revolutionary project and its educational implications are not those that "put on the red shirt", but that independently "are sympathetic to the project".

In response to the critique that schools and teachers were indoctrinating students, along Cuban lines, respondents generally highlighted the facile nature of such claims given the enormous challenges being confronted to implement any far-reaching reform in a system of mass education. Even if this was the goal it's practice becomes little more than a fantasy, as articulated by María:

I can say what I like in my class, and I do! To say that we want to create a curriculum to indoctrinate students to become socialists and communists is a lie. It is not as though by simply receiving some knowledge you become a socialist. That is ridiculous! ... You can't achieve socialism or communism by decree. You can't build it overnight. This is a cliché used by the opposition to say that our children are going to become communists.

For María, the values being promoted are in fact universal values, "the values of solidarity, of love, the right to life, the right to human values". Significantly, the self-identified anti-Chavista José offered a similar argument, expressing a shared frustration at teachers' general resistance to change and

support for the advancement of universal values which, he agreed, were still far from being realised in any consistent and comprehensive way:

The political formation of students in school, their integral formation, is important. We need to educate then about democratic values, about critical, reflective, participatory values, and all of these values that we defend like liberty, etcetera. But our people are extremely conservative ... When the most conservative values are in the teachers, if only Chávez was successful in indoctrinating them! If only! This is something that takes generations...

So, when some anti-Chavistas talk about the Cubanisation, Hah! If only! It's impossible. Knowing the teachers, and there are some that are very good, with a strong sense of vocation who are very effective with their students, but listen, they too are very conservative with respect to democratic values, family values, national values.

### **Bolivarian EFA and world-systems analysis**

Part of the international interest in the Bolivarian Revolution lies in the context of the global social justice movement, what Wallerstein (2006) describes as a worldwide “movement of movements”, in the spirit of the World Social Forum, seeking to develop alternatives to the capitalist world-system (Abin et al., 2002; Chávez, 2005a; Vivas et al., 2004). Whether and how the Bolivarian process transcends Old Left movements, to meaningfully contribute to a larger anti-systemic movement that might influence the transformation of the existing capitalist world-system (see Wallerstein, 1984, 1991, 2004), underlies the interest in its EFA project.

World-systems institutional theory, arguing for a set of world cultural beliefs that shape national governments' policies and principles with respect to education, take us some way in accounting for the EFA agenda in Venezuela (e.g. John Boli & Ramirez, 1986; John Boli & Thomas, 1999; Meyer, 1994; Meyer, Nagel, & Snyder, 1993; Ramirez & Rubinson, 1979). Graffe's (2004) historical work indirectly highlights that the current EFA agenda is in many ways an extension of previous policy pursuing integral, single-session school education for all, now with the political will, financial capacity and broader social policy to meaningfully realise the agenda. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach arguably complements such a perspective, in its central argument of a shared ideology of liberalism, or 'geoculture of development', based in nation-states' shared belief in the capacity of the scientific and technological revolutions to deliver ongoing national economic development and growth, and with it increased consumption (Wallerstein, 1992a, 1992b, 1995a, 1995b). Wallerstein sets this up as emerging from nation-states and their multiple polities' participation in the single world-economy, but in some ways the outcomes is a similar set of cultural beliefs underlying policy towards EFA.

The radical, politicised nature of the Venezuelan EFA project, coupled with the extraordinary missions, point to a contextually specific interpretation of the EFA agenda, along the lines of a conventional dialectic between the global and the local (Arnove & Torres, 2003). As with the broader political project, closer analysis over time is needed to determine the extent of the rupture with world models of education. Calls for integral EFA, promoting students' capacities for critical understanding and reflection on the world, and values of solidarity etcetera, are not dissimilar from policy statements in

any part of the world, but in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution they take on particular significance. Similarly, goals of preparing students who will “incorporate themselves in productive activity of benefit to themselves, their family and the society of which they are a part” (Ministerio de Educación y Deportes, 2006e, p. 10) align with world-systems accounts, albeit in a context seeking to reconstruct socio-economic relations towards collective and participatory structures.

Beginning at the turn of the century, the Bolivarian Revolution comes in a very different global context to other socialist experiments, and with a consistent theme of moving beyond the failings of the now historic Soviet model. The revolution is being implemented through a liberal democratic system of national governance, the popular mandate for change enduring consistent opposition in the mainstream print and electronic media. Perhaps most significantly, at the level of formal policy, the proposed preparation of citizens for the project of constructing a viable 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism is to come not through their uncritical formalistic learning of the official party / Bolivarian / Chávez line, but through students’ experience of authentic, participatory and protagonistic democracy, and through their learning to critically understand, reflect on, and transform their world.

Ongoing interest remains then in the ways in which the official policy of “lights and morals” to instil socialist values is translated into practice. How the reforms of curricula, systemic organisation and teachers’ pedagogy are applied, and received by students and school communities, needs ongoing research. The same applies to the proposed practice of protagonistic and participatory democracy in schooling, giving the local community meaningful say over the individual schools’ curricula tied to local conditions, needs, and development projects. As the educational and broader political project unfold, this research will help to assess the extent to which Bolivarian EFA marks a distinctive break with world-system models, and in the longer term contributes meaningfully, rather than formalistically, to the 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist project at the national, regional and global levels.

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