

¡VIVA LA EDUCACIÓN!

Report of the 2023 NEU delegation to Cuba
21–26 October



NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION DELEGATION TO CUBA 21–26 October 2023



According to the Overseas Development Institute, Cuba is among the twenty best performing countries in the world at meeting the eight international development goals established following the 2000 UN Millennium Summit.

In October 2023, during the half term break, NEU members visited this small Caribbean Island to find out how they achieve high quality education, bearing in mind the US blockade is now in its 62nd year and continues to cause extreme economic hardship.

Delegation members

- Nikki Ajibade, Warwickshire
- Jo Allen, Staffordshire
- Emma Aston, Sutton
- Louise Birch, NEU officer
- Sala Ba, Croydon
- George Buchanan, Oxfordshire
- Evadne Bygrave, Bexley
- Mairead Canavan, NEU Executive
- Faye Curran, West Essex
- Carla Diego-Franceskides, Lambeth
- Jodie Evans, Hillington
- Scarlet Harris, NEU staff
- Rachel Hesselwood, Bradford
- Anne-Marie Hickling, Enfield
- Sarah Hovington, Surrey
- Claudia Kershaw, Tameside
- Heather Marciano, Cheshire West and Cheshire
- Cristina Paya-Barge, South Gloucestershire
- Bernard Regan, Cuba Solidarity Campaign
- Rebecca Sheffield, Birmingham
- Ekta Shetty, Bristol
- Joe Wilson, Oxfordshire

Reflections

"My visit to Cuba has changed my life and was the most wonderful learning experience. The one thing that stood out time and time again throughout our whole trip was that love permeates the education system and love is held with the highest regard."

Rebecca Sheffield, Birmingham

"Sourcing materials to deliver their quality education programme remains a major difficulty. That aside, there are many lessons we can learn from Cuba. One is the emphasis placed on arts in education, supporting the holistic development of Cuban students and citizens. Everywhere we visited we were treated to displays of art, music, song and dance."

Nikki Ajibade, Warwickshire

"Teachers received twelve hours of planning, preparation and assessment time each week, in comparison to three and a half hours per week in the UK. There is compulsory training once a month for all teachers, directed through the municipality. Teachers' work is evaluated by the school principal and through monthly visits from the local municipality. Teachers struggling to maintain a good teaching standard are mentored within the school. Every teacher, regardless of performance, has a personalised CPD plan."

Claudia Kershaw, Tameside

"Cuba really does hold education in the highest esteem – for a delegation of teachers, this was a humbling and unforgettable experience."

Anne-Marie Hickling, Enfield



URBAN AND RURAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Alfredo Miguel Aguayo Sanchez School, Santo Suarez, Havana

Explaining the school's ethos, the head teacher of this 25 class primary cited José Martí, Cuba's national hero who fought to liberate the country from Spain: "We do not inherit the land from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children and we help these children create a better future."

The school day for 640 students is a vibrant tapestry of learning and community engagement. From early morning arrivals for working parents to cultural events led by pupils, the day unfolds with core subjects – PE, art, and computing. Afternoon classes extend until 4:30pm, accommodating working families until 6pm.

Teacher and parent relationships are especially strong. Every Tuesday evening, parents actively participate in school affairs, reflecting a deep commitment to their children's education. Parents who were former pupils choose to send their children to the school, even if they live a distance away.

The Head emphasised the importance of the teacher-parent-student bond, stating that "education is an act of love." She also explained the material challenges they face caused by the US blockade. A first grader classroom had just one working outdated computer. Over 90% of students do not have a computer at home.

Teachers find innovative ways of overcoming these obstacles. The computer teacher had used her own resources to create colourful animal character displays to help the children learn the keyboard. Given the shortages, all members of the school community up-cycle everything.

The school has a dedicated Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) teacher on site who plays a vital role in shaping an inclusive curriculum. Acknowledged nationally, the SEND specialist's work, supported by UNICEF, has empowered children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Head emphasised the importance of integrating SEND children into regular classes, highlighting the positive impact on both their progress and the learning community.

Carla Diego and Sala Ba



Seminternado Primaria Juan Clemente Zenea Primary School, Pinar del Río

The Seminternado Primaria Juan Clemente Zenea is set in the rural and mountainous El Moncada area of Cuba. The 56 pupils on roll from preschool to sixth grade have the option to board if required, and the school includes a nursery for working families.

Twenty-five staff work under the Head, including eleven teachers, an administrator, three cleaners and painters, two chefs, three overnight security personnel for boarding children, a caretaker, an educational psychologist and three people who grow food for the school. A school bus is provided for staff who don't live locally.

Like many of the Cuban schools we visited, the large staff to student ratio was noticeable. In one of the early primary classrooms we visited, there was one teacher and one pedagogical assistant supporting six children.

The school day ran slightly longer than that of many UK schools. Beginning with the Cuban national anthem just before 8am and ending at 4.30-5pm, children had around eight classes per day, broken up by playtimes and lunchtimes. Early morning childcare was offered for working parents, including the children of teaching staff. This was staffed by pedagogical assistants, organised through a rota. Teachers also utilised two educational TV channels which broadcast televised lessons. The school opened on Saturdays, with recreational activities including sports.

The US blockade continues to limit access to goods, forcing staff to be resourceful in order to ensure there is enough school equipment. In the science block sat a perfectly hand drawn periodic table wall display. As with much of Cuba, there are regular blackouts in the school. These follow a predictable national schedule, and the school timetable is altered accordingly.

There are no league tables or school rankings in the local municipality, simply points for development for each school. School budgets were spread out across the municipalities rather than allocated per child or via systems such as Pupil Premium funding, ensuring school funding received is proportionate to that of inner city counterparts.

Claudia Kershaw and Rebecca Sheffield

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS



Manuel Saumuell Specialist Music School, Havana

The school was established in 1971 and has been visited by NEU delegates for many years. The government invests in free instruments and lessons in line with its national cultural policy, which recognizes the importance of arts education in holistic child development. Entry to specialist music schools in Cuba is exclusively based on the pupils' talent and is free to all those that pass the performance entry exams. Students can specialise in a selection of instruments (violin, viola, guitar, clarinet, flute, saxophone, piano and percussion) taught by professionals from the industry and specially trained teachers.

The timetable is rigorous as students study the same curriculum as ordinary schools in addition to their obligatory music and performance practice and rehearsals. We enjoyed an amazing performance by the students showcasing their impressive talent. Echoing observations from our other school visits, we noted especially warm and caring teacher-student interactions.

Evadne Bygrave

Abel Santamaría Cuadrado School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Havana

Alba sits meticulously completing a three-dimensional artwork alongside her 5th grade classmates. Like most of them, she has an ambition for the future – to become a teacher at this school. At the present time, five staff members went to school here and from the warm, nurturing atmosphere you begin to understand why they want to continue being part of the Abel Santamaría school community.

Light streams into the classrooms of this calm, yet industrious campus, a factor that plays an important role in providing optimal conditions for the students here. With a staff of 77, including teachers, support staff, an optometrist and ophthalmologist,





Escuela Profesional de Arte (EPA) Pedro Raúl Sánchez

the school has inclusion as a core principle. The curriculum for the 62 pupils is the same as in mainstream schools, with adaptations for blind and visually impaired pupils as well as for the 14 pupils with SEND. Lessons in visual rehabilitation and orientation and mobility ensure that the children learn to their full potential. The school also functions as a transitional setting, meaning that several children join local mainstream schools, with the necessary equipment, depending on their needs. In addition, some of the staff visit other local schools to give specialist support.

Despite the blockade, which results in a shortage of specialist equipment, the members of this school community achieve their educational goals and staff work with families in the local area, supporting those with social problems. For pupils living a greater distance away, a weekday boarding system operates – a way to ensure that no one misses out. Vocational interests are discussed with families, with some pupils opting to attend both school-based workshops and those organised by the institute for the blind.

As visiting delegates, we were able to witness the ongoing work in the school and present highly valued Braille machines which were donated by the NEU districts represented. We were delighted by a surprise concert, emanating pure joy and showcasing some wonderful musical talent.

Anne-Marie Hickling



We visited EPA Pedro Raúl Sánchez, an extraordinary school for the Performing Arts with exceptionally talented students and teachers. Upon arrival we were welcomed by a saxophone performance by students and their teacher. As we took a tour around the school we were treated to a variety of dance and music performances at every turn of the school corridors. We were struck by how talented these young people were.

EPA is a selective school with 229 students and a curriculum that spans performing arts specialisms including classical music, jazz, traditional Cuban dance and ballet. These subjects are considered to be of the utmost value, in stark contrast to the UK, where creative subjects continue to be devalued and cut from the curriculum.

The pride, passion and dedication of both teachers and children were apparent throughout. During an orchestral performance, students from other classes and grades joined to watch and support their peers. Student performances were sophisticated and moving, and expressed authentic joy and passion. From talking to students and staff, the love for their vocation really shone through.

Teachers also spoke about their struggles, such as issues with the access to instruments, and with their repair and maintenance. They have difficulty sourcing strings and reeds for woodwind instruments. Additionally, due the lack of access to ballet points, classical ballet has had to be removed from the curriculum.

Students spoke of their aspirations and many wanted to travel the world and share their musical passions, with one girl explaining how she wants to popularise the oboe.

Although students' education at EPA starts at grade 5, children are given the opportunity to learn dance and music from a young age at local cultural centres in each district. These centres offer these experiences for free, ensuring that young people from all backgrounds can be involved in the arts. In Cuba the opportunity to attend performing arts schools like EPA are not reserved only for the privileged few.

Jodie Evans

LITERACY, WOMEN



Federation of Cuban Women (FMC)

Inside a grand colonial building, FMC representative Dania Rodríguez Gutiérrez gave us an outline of the organisation's history and achievements. It was founded in 1960 and led by the feminist Vilma Espín, a key revolutionary figure who mobilised women following the 1959 Revolution. Cuba was an early leader in recognising women's rights and they held positions of power and responsibility in government. Cuba was the first country in Latin America to legalise abortion and created child-care centres to allow women to join the workforce. Ground-breaking legislation, such as the 1997 Law of the National Plan of Action and the more recent Family Code, pushes the government to act to make gender equality a reality. Today, 92% of Cuban women aged 15 years and above are represented in the FMC. There are various organisational levels from the grass roots up to national government. As with all our delegation visits, it was truly inspiring to learn of the FMC's achievements benefitting women across all sectors of society. Through their efforts in implementing equality legislation, women's presence in managerial positions in all sectors is high: 55% are represented in parliament, 52.4% in local councils, 53.3% in sciences, 62% are doctors, more than 70% are lawyers and over 80% are in education.

Cristina Paya-Barge

Literacy Campaign Museum

We met with Luisa Campos, the director of this unique museum, to learn about the celebrated 1961 Literacy Campaign – an eight-month-long effort to abolish illiteracy after the revolution. More than a quarter of a million volunteers – brigadistas – who were mostly young women, travelled across the island teaching people to read and write. Students from urban areas, some as young as 10 years old, underwent training before travelling to rural locations without electricity or running water. These interactions between urban and rural Cubans helped to break down social barriers and was key in the remaking of a more equal society. Today, Cuba's literacy programme [Yo, Si Puedo – Yes, I Can] has been adopted in more than 30 countries around the world – a prime example of Cuba's impressive international solidarity work in education.

Nikki Ajibade



I AND SOLIDARITY



TRADE UNIONS

University of Pinar del Río, Hermanos Saiz Montes de Oca

While visiting the University of Pinar del Río we met branch members and representatives from the union. We were welcomed by Kenia Rodríguez who described their work with 27,401 members, 754 sections and 46 branches in the province.

The union aimed to create a trusting space for debate and discussion to foster values of democracy and improve workers' conditions. Members felt that their concerns were fairly heard by union officials and by the state, and reflected in policy and change. Many of our delegates commented that, while supported by our union, we are often in opposition to the decisions made by our government.

A rich and challenging discussion followed Kenia's presentation. The NEU delegation sought to understand the differences in the political system and how this affects trade union activity, and Cuban trade union members sought to understand the constraints set by the UK government in which the NEU operates.

What became increasingly clear was that, whilst on the surface it may appear that education is much more state-controlled in Cuba than in the UK, Cuban educators have more freedom with curriculum and the running of their schools than the NEU delegation felt they had in the UK, and Cuban educators are happy with the curriculum they are given to deliver. It was clear how well-embedded trade unionism is within the curriculum, with students of all ages receiving robust political education and the importance of workers' voices being key in the country's policy making. The trade union was well-embedded in the community, with the union undertaking various social-justice campaigns.

The visit with these trade unionists was inspiring and the delegation left with a better understanding (and for most of us, envy) of the relationship between the political system in Cuba and the union, and the impact of this on the teaching profession.

Rachel Hesselwood



Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP)

ICAP was created in 1960 with the aim of telling people outside Cuba the true humanitarian purpose of the Revolution and to counter anti-Cuban US propaganda. ICAP continues to foster international solidarity with countries worldwide with a focus on education and health. We met with ICAP's president, Fernando Gonzalez Llort, a member of the national assembly and one of the Miami or Cuban Five. Fernando explained the damaging effects of the US blockade on all sectors of the economy. He described the blockade as a conjunction of coercive measures that exclude Cuba from international markets and severely hamper the country's economy. It is the most enduring trade blockade in modern history with 80% of Cubans living their entire lives under its yoke. Sourcing educational resources is especially difficult. He spoke passionately about how, despite all the material shortages, Cuban children learn happily in a safe environment, free from violence and drugs. Fernando ended his talk urging us to tell those outside Cuba about the blockade and help galvanise international support to end it.

Nikki Ajibade

Niurka María González Orberá, General Secretary of Cuban teaching union SNTECD

Niurka told the delegation that trade unions play a key role in managing the 'socialist emulation' – Cuban socialism shaped by cultural, social and economic activities that benefit all Cubans. The symbolic leader of the SNTECD is the revolutionary martyr Frank País, a teacher and revolutionary leader killed by Batista's police in 1957. The SNTECD awards the Order of Frank País in recognition of extraordinary merits acquired in education, or to those who have contributed in a relevant and selfless way to the comprehensive and educational training of citizens, or who have made valuable contributions to the development of education. Bernard Regan, Cuba Solidarity Campaign Secretary and member of our delegation, was the first foreigner to receive this honorific distinction.

George Buchanan

The blockade is still in place, but together we can work to end it once and for all

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JOIN AN NEU DELEGATION TO CUBA

October Half-Term

Two centre study tour travelling to Havana and Pinar del Río and Viñales to examine current educational provision in rural and urban environments.

Visits to primary, secondary, special educational needs and arts schools; professional meetings with teachers and trade unions, the Federation of Cuban Women and student organisations; plus historical, cultural and community visits.

Package includes flights, accommodation, transfers, visas, English-speaking guide and translator, and some meals.

Exclusive to NEU members who need to be nominated by their districts or branches.

Contact international@neu.org.uk for details.



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