

The following text was originally published in *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIV, no. 1/2, 1994, p. 107–19

©UNESCO: International Bureau of Education, 2000

This document may be reproduced free of charge as long as acknowledgement is made of the source

# JOSE MARTÍ

(1853–95)

*Ricardo Nassif<sup>1</sup>*

The life, work and thought of José Martí may be viewed from many different angles. Our intention here is to present a profile of him as an educator and to outline his main educational ideas. The greatness of his style is revealed in everything that he produced, from the *versos sencillos* ('simple verses') to the most impassioned of his revolutionary speeches, whereas his thoughts on education are scattered throughout his writings and emerge in the most unexpected places. However, their importance justifies examination, even though they are very often hidden away in his literary works or among his political ideas.

## The teacher

Martí was a professional teacher only by accident, but it should be noted that his personality was so structured that in him what was incidental gave rise to the expression of permanent truths.

Martí was influenced by great figures such as José de la Luz y Caballero, whom he did not know personally, and Rafael María Mendive, who sowed within him the seeds of a humanistic vocation which never ceased to grow and develop.

José de la Luz had been the teacher of the generation which preceded Martí's and, as Martí himself admitted, taught him the fundamental lesson that 'sitting down to produce books, which is not difficult, is impossible when one is consumed by worry and anxiety and there is no time for the most difficult task of all, which is to produce men' (I, 854).<sup>2</sup> However, while de la Luz was a legendary figure, Mendive was for Martí an everyday example of a poet and teacher.

Martí received his early schooling in a small district school in Havana, but made such rapid progress that when he reached the age of 10 his parents decided to send him to a larger school where he could study English and accountancy. However, his family's means were so straitened that his father very soon decided that 'he already knew enough', and took him away to work in the fields. At this point one of his godparents insisted that he should be introduced to Mendive who, in 1865, had recently become principal of the Havana High School for Boys. In this school Mendive created such an atmosphere of poetry and learning that Martí felt that all his deepest longings in this respect were satisfied, while at the same time there was revealed to 'him his own creative activity which became conscious of itself as a result of such fruitful contacts'.<sup>3</sup> In this atmosphere he not only responded with enthusiasm to the life of sentiment and spirit, but also acted on occasion as teacher, taking on responsibility for the school during the absences of the principal.

With the assistance he received from Mendive he was able to complete the first two years of the secondary-school course, taking his leaving certificate at a later date in Spain, together with his university course. In Madrid he began his studies of law, philosophy and literature, and to eke out his financial resources, gained his first experience as a private tutor to two children when he was barely 18 years old.

From Madrid he went to Saragossa, where he obtained degrees in civil and canon law, philosophy and literature. From Saragossa he proceeded to Paris and then to England, before leaving for Mexico. It was in Mexico that he came into contact with the confrontation between

romanticism and positivism; he attended the discussions held in 1875 in the Liceo Hidalgo, which provided a forum in which the ideas of the reformers Benito Juárez and Lerdo were aired. Martí took part in these discussions to outline some of the ideas which he was to develop at a later date.

Martí was in Mexico until the end of 1876, when he moved to Guatemala, where he became teacher of literature and composition at the Central Teacher Training College, whose principal was his fellow-countryman Izaguirre. He also taught German, French, English and Italian literature at the university. Notwithstanding the success of this teaching experience, which was the most systematic he ever acquired, in December 1878 he returned to Havana, where he was granted temporary permission to teach at the Hernández y Plasencia College of primary and secondary education, while at the same time working part-time in a lawyer's office. A year later his teaching permit was withdrawn and he was forced to take up a minor position in law. However, as an indefatigable conspirator on behalf of Cuban independence, he was imprisoned for a second time (the first occasion had been when he was hardly more than 16 years old). Subsequently he sailed again for Spain, and thereafter Paris and, in 1880, New York.

In 1881 he sought refuge in Venezuela where, soon after his arrival, the Colegio de Santo María employed him as a teacher of French language and literature. Guillermo Tell Villegas allowed him the use of classrooms where he was surrounded by students who—in the words of Lisazo<sup>4</sup>—felt themselves captivated by a kind of magic. However, this too was to come to an early end, since the President, Guzman Blanco, disapproved of this passionate Cuban who preached the doctrine of freedom so energetically.

Returning once more to New York, he began to work actively for his country's independence, displaying incredible energy and fighting spirit, which went hand in hand with boundless compassion. The result was the publication of *La edad del oro* (The golden age), 'a monthly publication for the entertainment and instruction of the children of America', as it was described on the cover of the first issue, which appeared in July 1889. Martí's language did not lose in beauty, nor did it fall into puerility or sentimentality, when addressed to children. This is shown by charming biographical studies such as *Tres héroes* (San Martín, Bolívar and Hidalgo); poetical gems such as *Dos milagros*; stories, such as the story of the man recounted by the houses he has lived in; translations of stories, such as *Meñique* or *El camarón encantado*; adaptations from *The Iliad*, and many other works.

What was Martí trying to achieve with *La edad de oro*? He stated his intention himself in indicating those for whom the publication was intended:

so that American children may know how people used to live, and how they live nowadays, in America and in other countries; how many things are made, such as glass and iron, steam engines and suspension bridges and electric light; so that when a child sees a coloured stone he will know why the stone is coloured....We shall tell them about everything which is done in factories, where things happen which are stranger and more interesting than the magic in fairy stories. These things are real magic, more marvelous than any....We write for children because it is they who know how to love, because it is children who are the hope for the world (II, 1207–8).

*La edad de oro* ceased publication in October 1889. However, Martí's active feeling of compassion continued to find expression, and whereas previously children had been the object of his attention, it was now the turn of the poor. In New York, he became the driving force behind La Liga de la Instrucción (The league for education) for coloured workers, and he returned to teaching as a Spanish teacher at the Central High School.

It was in this way, while continuing his struggle for Cuban freedom, that his life was spent during the agitated period from 1890 to 1895. Finally, on 31 January 1895, he sailed from New York on a voyage from which he was never to return. Fighting for his country at the battle of Boca de Dos Ríos, he was killed on 19 May 1895. His death seems almost to have been a voluntary and creative act, such as he had always wished: 'as a good man, with my face to the sun'.

We have not attempted here to provide a full biography of the ‘Cuban apostle’, merely to indicate the periods during his life when he was able to work systematically as a schoolmaster and teacher. To sum up, it is clear that he had no time for the sort of teaching which was enclosed in the four walls of a classroom. America was his real classroom, in which he was the supreme teacher as a liberator of peoples, although there always existed deep within him the other teacher who emerged only from time to time.

## His educational ideas

Two factors help to explain the scanty attention which has been paid to Martí’s ideas.<sup>5</sup> In this first place—a characteristic which he shares with almost all those who helped to build America—the thinker was overshadowed by the man of action, and it is hard when attempting to penetrate into the difficult terrain of purely intellectual matters not to be carried away by the charm of his humanity and poetry. The second factor is to be found in the interpretation of the term ‘pedagogy’, based on the relationship now being established between education and life. Seen from this approach, unknown to the educational theories of the past, Martí’s personality and achievements form a whole, and everything he expressed in writing or in his political activity helps us to understand him as an educator and as an educational theorist.

In fact, he wrote comparatively little on pedagogy, although too much for it to be possible to give an exhaustive analysis in a brief survey such as this.

## The idea of education

Among the many definitions that Martí gave of education, we have chosen the following: ‘Education...is a way of equipping people to acquire a comfortable and honest livelihood in the world in which they live, without thereby thwarting the sensitive, lofty and spiritual aspirations which represent the best part of the individual human being’ (II, 495). ‘Education has an inescapable duty towards man...: to adapt him to the age in which he lives, without turning him aside from the great and final objective of human life’ (II,497). ‘To educate is to give man the keys to the world, which are independence and love, and to give him strength to journey on his own, light of step, a spontaneous and free being’ (I, 1965).

In the four concepts quoted above we find two ideas which are central to Martí’s concept of education: education is a preparation of man for life, not forgetting his spiritual side; and education is the adaptation of man to his times. This may be interpreted to mean that education represents for each individual the mastery of his autonomy and the development of his natural and spiritual self.

Martí clearly distinguishes *education* from *instruction*. The former is concerned with the feelings, while the latter is related to thought. However, he also recognizes that there can be no good education without instruction, since ‘moral qualities increase in value when they are enhanced by intellectual qualities’ (I, 853). It is this distinction which helps us to understand the importance of education as an attempt to ‘entrust man with the whole of human achievement’, and to ‘make each man a summary of the living world up to his own time’. Education, in the sense of a summing-up, is impossible unless it is accompanied by instruction; but by adapting man to his times and providing him with the capacity for liberty and the life of the spirit, education fulfils no more than its basic task, namely the cultivation of all the human faculties as a whole.

In Martí’s educational theory none of the ideas summarized above has had greater impact than the idea that education should adapt man to his times. His statement that ‘the divorce which exists between the education given during a particular period and the period itself is simply criminal’ (II, 507) in fact contains two meanings. One is direct and literal. Martí sees the period as

the time in which it is given to us to live in common with all our contemporaries; this reveals the keen historical awareness which permeates all his pedagogical thought. Each period requires educational institutions and patterns which are suited to it, and this needs to be clearly stated with respect to higher education: 'For the New World we need a New University' (II, 507).

The second meaning conveyed is more figurative and indirect, although as real as the literal meaning; its purport is to project the time plane on to the historical one in such a way that they merge into each other. The period is not only a 'time' but also an 'environment'. In an article published in *Patria* (2 July 1883), Martí says:

The danger of educating children away from their homeland looms almost as large as the need for the children of ill-fated countries which are still struggling into existence to be educated abroad, where they may acquire the knowledge necessary for the full development of their emerging countries...The danger is great, because it is a mistake to grow orange trees and then transplant them to Norway, or to plant apple trees which are expected to bear fruit in Ecuador; a transplanted tree must be able to conserve its native sap so that when it returns to its native soil it may take root. (I, 863)

Referring to his reasons for publishing *La edad de oro*, he wrote to his Mexican correspondent, Manuel Mercado:

The magazine is concerned with serious ideas, and as I have taken this upon myself...its aim must be to promote what I seek to promote, which is that our countries should be inhabited by people with original minds, brought up to be happy in the country in which they live and to live in harmony with it, not divorced from it like citizens in name only, or disdainful foreigners who regard their birth in this part of the world as a punishment. (II, 1201)

This is not a xenophobic attitude, since few people have believed as firmly as Martí in solidarity between peoples. Nor is it arbitrary, because the natural development of man is itself conditioned by the atmosphere existing in a particular society, for the reason that 'the purpose of education is not to form an individual who is inexistent, either because he disdains or because he is unable to adapt to the country in which he has to live; it is to prepare him to live a good and useful life there' (I, 864). This means forming people in accordance with the ideal which Martí proclaims for America: 'people who are good, useful and free' (I, 866).

For Martí this raises three questions. How can you form goodness, except through love? How can people be made free, if they are not allowed to live in freedom? How can they be made useful without a scientific knowledge of the forces of nature?

## **Education as an act of creation**

Martí's view of education as an act of love is illustrated throughout his own life and in the ideas which he expressed on this subject. In his opinion, the act of education is a specific relationship between human beings nurtured by love. It was this belief which was behind his call for the establishment of a body of 'missionary' teachers who would be able to 'launch a campaign of tenderness and knowledge' (II, 515), a body of itinerant teachers, not pedantic schoolmasters, who would engage in dialogue.

Even more specifically, education is a constant act of creation, and for Martí the main creative agent is the teacher. He expressed this poetically when recalling his stay in Guatemala: 'I had come some months before to a beautiful village; when I arrived I was poor, I knew no one and my spirits were low. Without affronting my self-respect or offending my pride, the sincere and generous people of that village gave shelter to me as a humble pilgrim: they made me their teacher, which was the same as making me a creator' (II, 205).

## Education and the child's development

While this was how Martí saw the act of education from the teacher's viewpoint he also saw it as a relationship, whose opposite pole is the pupil. The four published issues of *La edad de oro* sufficiently indicate his thorough knowledge of the child's mind, but in addition his writings contain a series of ideas on the development of the child and of education. He held that education should not disturb the child's development, and schools should be 'places for the cultivation of reason' where, through judicious guidance, children gradually learn to form their own ideas.

The principle of individuality as a basic factor in education is precisely one of the key ideas in Martí's educational thinking. In effect, he describes individuality as what European pedagogues at the beginning of the twentieth century were to call the 'regulating element' in education. He argued that 'Education is the road, but the child's character and individuality are the motive force' (I, 1960). He thus came to formulate the general concept of self-education that 'Education is the use of learning to guide one's own powers' (II, 737); and to view education in general—the reference to Rousseau is obvious—as 'growth' from within, which begins at birth and ends only with death (II, 1261).

## The social and political dimension of education

José Martí also had a clear view of the social dimension of education as both a phenomenon and a process. This he expressed in his ideas on the sociology of education, which in themselves constitute principles for an educational policy.

'Of all the problems which are nowadays considered to be of paramount importance, only one is in fact so. It is of such tremendous importance that all the time and energy in the world would hardly be enough to solve it, namely the ignorance of the classes which have justice on their side' (I, 737). These words provide us with the key to his socio-political thinking on education. While he himself expressed his thoughts in terms of action, love and creativity, nowadays we prefer to express it in more specifically sociological, political and democratic terms.

With this in mind, Martí highlighted one of the ideas which characterized liberal democracy in Latin America during the second half of the nineteenth century, that of 'popular education'. Almost all his socio-pedagogical ideas take this kind of education as their starting-point for the progress of people, although it is defined in extremely wide terms: 'Popular education does not mean only the education of the poorer classes; it means that all the classes of the nation, in other words the people, should be well educated' (I, 853). In addition, such education is the only way of achieving democracy, since—to quote his own words—'An ignorant man is on the way to becoming an animal, whereas an educated and responsible man is on the way to becoming God; and no one would hesitate between a people of gods and a people of animals' (I, 854). Martí had boundless faith in education as the remedy for the ills of society, especially if its objective was to arouse people to an awareness of their solidarity (cf. II, 510).

Martí's educational policy never became the vain dreams and ideals of a lifelong exile excluded from any part in the government of his country. In his conception of educational policy, he attached over-riding importance to the principles of 'national education', 'freedom of education' and 'compulsory education'; although he significantly reversed the order of the last two concepts, giving priority to compulsory education over freedom of education on the grounds that he considered 'the beneficial tyranny of the former to be worth more than the freedom of the latter'.

## Science education

In an educated society, which for Martí is the same as ‘a free people’, people are educated for freedom, in the same way as the good man is formed by love. However, in addition to goodness and freedom, he required men to be useful; and to train them to this end, he proposed science education as paving the way for the development of the intelligence, as an instrument for individual autonomy and the keystone of the progress of peoples.

Martí constantly emphasized the importance of science education, contrasting it with, or distinguishing it from, education which he called ‘classical’, ‘literary’, ‘formal’ or ‘ornamental’. In this approach he revealed the influence of Herbert Spencer, although in Martí’s case it was broadened by a poetic love of nature. His naturalism was spiritualized, not biological or materialist; it was closer to Rousseau than to Spencer.

His view of education was not merely formal or rhetorical, but based on the study of nature. This promoted social progress, because ‘to study the forces of nature and learn to control them is the most direct way of solving social problems’ (I, 1076). Science was the only path leading to nature, and essential to introduce science education ‘wherever new men are to emerge’ (I, 1829).

Martí contrasts ‘scientific humanism’ with ‘classical humanism’, arguing that education based on the latter is out of date and only offers ‘ornament and elegance’ (cf. II, 495–6). Commenting on the meeting of the principals of the Massachusetts schools in 1883 he noted that

Traditional education, based on Greek poems and Latin books, or on the histories of Livy or Suetonius, is now taking its last stand against a rising new type of education. This is now establishing itself as the legitimate expression of the impatience of men at last set free to learn and to act, who need to know about the creation and movement and progress of the earth which is theirs to cultivate, making it yield by their labours the means of universal well-being and of their own sustenance. (II, 496).

To refute the argument in defence of the study of dead languages as providing mental exercise, he asks whether contemplation of ‘the admirable and harmonious order of nature would not be more beneficial to the mind than that of the inversion of the normal order of words in a Latin sentence or the comparative study of Greek dialects’ (II, 496).

The strange thing is that in fact Martí did not regard the study of Greek or Latin as useless; of those who argued that they were totally useless, he said that ‘they have savoured the delights of neither Greek nor Latin; neither the books of Homer which seem like the first forests on earth, with their huge trunks, nor the fragrance and delicacy of the epistles by the friend of Maecenas’ (II, 496). He nevertheless adduced powerful arguments against classical education. The first was that he wished America to have not merely rhetoricians and aesthetes, but men capable of making the earth yield happiness for its peoples. The second was clearly of a political nature: he considered that these languages helped to form a caste system, and that to continue to teach them alone would be to encourage those who still maintained ‘the need to construct a barrier of an exclusive highly educated class against the universal assault of new and vigorous currents of social thought which are carrying all before them’ (II, 593).

This profound belief in science education explains why Martí constantly demanded a radical reform of contemporary education. It also explains his enthusiasm when he visited an engineering school in Saint Louis (in the United States), and when he wrote down the syllabus of the school of electrical engineering; and when he learnt that Nicaragua, in celebration of an anniversary, was opening an Arts and Vocational Training School on the lines of those already existing in Guatemala, Honduras and Uruguay, and about to be opened in Chile and El Salvador (II, 507–10). It also explains the reforming zeal which he showed in his unflagging support for the establishment of agricultural schools (II, 501) actually in the countryside; his insistence that each school should

have a workshop adjoining it; his belief in the educational value of manual work (I, 1969 and II, 510); his reference to the importance of physical education (II, 537); his aim of raising women to be a spiritualizing force in society by means of education (II, 500–1); his keen interest in the methods used in a Mexican school for the deaf and dumb (II, 814); his brief comparison of the old system of education with the new system he dreamt of: ‘At school we were beaten into learning by heart; but where we learned most was on the journey there through the snow’ (II, 97).

The question arises as to whether Martí’s pedagogy was strictly science-based. As regards the origin of his interest in science, we have already said that the importance he attributed to science education arose solely from his desire to make Americans useful and independent. However, the influence of Spencer is undeniable: Martí knew his work, and even left us an outline of his thought (I, 952), ascribing to him a major role in the intellectual liberation of America (II, 101). Nevertheless he did not accept his system as dogma, and rejected positivism on the grounds that it was ‘an immoral negation of being as something improvable and permanent’ (II, 1777). Martí’s positivism was in any case one which had been filtered through his own creative personality.

Mention has also been made of Martí’s pragmatism based on John Dewey’s ideas. Saul Flores,<sup>4</sup> who is one of the proponents of this theory, claims that there is no other way of explaining Martí’s call for the replacement of ‘rote learning in school’ by ‘practical learning’. However, in Martí’s work there is no mention either of Dewey or of his predecessors Pierce and William James. In addition, although Dewey’s ideas had already begun to circulate during the period when Martí was in New York (with interruptions, from 1880 to 1895), Martí’s first important books (*My pedagogic creed* and *the school and society*) appeared only in 1897 and 1900.

More to the point is the opinion of Díaz Ortega,<sup>6</sup> who maintains that the United States and Europe provided Martí with the foundations of an educational culture which he was able to use to criticize and compare the educational policy of Latin America; while it was Latin America which gave him the setting in which he could see and experience the basic educational problems facing its peoples. In addition, although there are similarities between Martí and Dewey, it is not going too far to assert that Martí’s pedagogical ideas are imbued with a guiding principle reflecting what might be called ‘spiritual activism’.<sup>7</sup> Santovenia said that Martí is, above all, ‘the man who seeks harmony’, and his ability to find harmony and take an overall view is also apparent in his pedagogical approach: starting with what is useful in American terms, it continues via the ideas of nature and freedom until it comes full circle to all that is spiritual in man.

Martí’s educational thought encompassed the most advanced ideas of his time. Yet in the context of Latin American history his thought anticipates the future, since it contains such modern principles as the use of national education as an instrument for achieving the autonomy of peoples; science education and the critical outlook; the relationship between education and work; and the principle of active pupil participation as the basis of learning. Like other great Latin American educators of the period, with a host of great writers and political leaders, Martí was a pioneer in education, blazing a trail along which we still have a considerable distance to travel.

## Notes

1. Ricard Nassif (Argentina). Professor at the Universities of Tucumán and La Plata before joining the staff of UNESCO. Author of numerous works, among which we may mention *Dewey: su pensamiento pedagógico* [Dewey: his educational thought] (1968) and *Spranger: su pensamiento pedagógico* [Spranger: his educational thought] (1968) and *Teoría de la educación* [Educational theory] (1980). His educational interests were directed towards the theory of education adapted to the Latin American situation. He died in 1984.
2. In order to avoid making the notes too long, I have added after each quotation from Martí’s works, in parentheses, the volume and page number (e.g. I, 807) of his *Obras completas* (Havana, Edición del Centenario, editorial Lex, 1953, 2 vols.).
3. F. Lisazo, *Martí, el místico del deber*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1940.

4. Saul Flores (in 'Martí educador', *Archivo José Martí* (ed. F. Lisazo, Ministry of Education, Havana), vol. VI, no. 1–4, January–December 1952) writes that it was Ernesto Morales, reviewing *La edad de oro*, who drew attention to Martí's educational theory. Fernández de la Vega (Martí, *Archivo José Martí*, vol. IV, no. 1, January–April 1943) shares Isidro Méndez's opinion that Martí's ideas make up 'a complete programme of popular education'. However, most of those who have dealt with this subject agree that we know little of Martí as a pedagogue apart from such studies as that by Diego Ortega ('Los valores educacionales en José Martí', *Archivo José Martí*, vol. V, no. 1, January–June 1950) or the brief articles by Saul Flores or Cordero Amador ('José Martí, educador', *Archivo José Martí*, vol. IV, no. 1, January–April 1943), Villalba and Villalba Sotillo ('Martí y la educación fundamental', *Archivo José Martí*, vol. V, no. 3, January–June 1951). There are only scattered references in the various published biographies of Martí, although it is possible that more recent studies exist which we have not been able to consult. It should clearly be understood that we are discussing Martí as a 'theoretician' of education, not Martí the 'educator', a subject which has been more amply dealt with, possibly because more easily accessible.
5. 'Martí educador', *Archivo José Martí*, vol. VI, no. 1–4, January–December 1952.
6. 'Humanismo y amor en José Martí', *Archivo José Martí*, vol. V, January–June 1951.
7. Very recently an interesting interpretation of Martí's spirituality was put forward by Adalberto Ronda Varona in his article 'La unidad de la teoría y la práctica: rasgo característico de la dialéctica en José Martí' (*Revista cubana de ciencias sociales*, (Centro de Estudios Filosóficos de la Academia de Ciencias de Cuba/Universidad de la Habana), no. 1, 1983, p. 50–64).