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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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RECORDS BRANCH

INTERNATIONAL LABOR SOCIAL AND HEALTH AFFAIRS

DE/R

Subject: Transmitting Memorandum Concerning Literacy in Cuba.

The Honorable
The Secretary of State,
Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to transmit a copy of a memorandum on literacy in Cuba prepared by Dr. Lowry NELSON, Rural Sociologist, Auxiliary Officer, who is making a study of rural social conditions in the Caribbean area. The memorandum is based on his examination of the 1943 census data of Cuba. It is transmitted as of possible interest to the Department and other agencies of our Government.

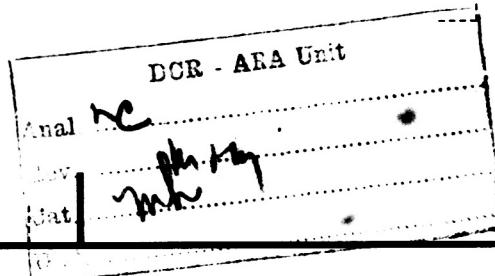
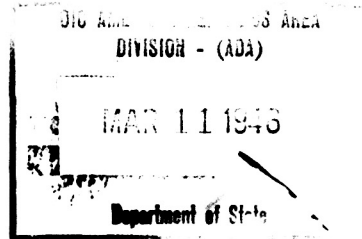
Respectfully yours,

For the Ambassador:

Paul G. Minneman
Paul G. Minneman
Agricultural Attaché

Enclosure:
Memorandum on
Literacy in Cuba

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Literacy of the Cuban Population

Lowry Nelson
Rural Sociologist

The number of literate persons in Cuba was reported in the census of 1899, and for the four subsequent enumerations in 1907, 1919, 1931, and 1943. For the years 1931 and 1943 the number of illiterates and those unknown or not reported are also given. These data on literacy are available for Provinces, white (native-born and foreign) and colored, by sex and age. In addition, in the two later censuses it is possible to make some approximate rural-urban comparisons.

Because the major part of the analysis to follow is based on the census of 1943, it is important to point out that the tabulation shows a grave statistical weakness in that the percentage marked "unknown" is unusually high, 6.6 per cent. In order to reveal the nature of the data with which we have to deal, the literacy status is set forth in

Table 1. Population of Cuba, 10 years of Age and Over, According to Literacy Status, by Nativity and Color, 1943.

NUMBER				
Literacy Status	Total number	Native White number	Foreign White number	Colored number
Total	3,575,434	2,532,942	139,962	902,530
Able to Read	2,550,847	1,840,033	102,605	608,209
Not able to Read	789,301	530,129	29,587	229,585
Unknown	235,286	162,780	7,770	64,736
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION				
Literacy Status	Total per cent	Native White per cent	Foreign White per cent	Colored per cent
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Able to Read	71.3	72.6	73.3	67.4
Not Able to Read	22.1	20.9	21.1	25.4
Unknown	6.6	6.5	5.6	7.2

Source: Censo de 1943, Tables 15 and 16.

By contrast the census of 1931 showed only one-tenth of one percent "not reported".¹ It is possible, therefore, that

¹In the 1931 census the phrase "sin informe" was used to designate the group on which information was lacking. In 1943, the phrase "se ignora" (to be ignorant of) was used. Some persons who are familiar with the 1943 census regard this difference as significant; that actually, in many

that the percentage of literate persons reported in 1943 does not include all who are in reality literate, although it is conceded by well-informed Cubans that the true figure would not greatly exceed the one reported.

Table 2. Trends in Literacy Rates in Cuba since 1899, 10 Years and over, by Province and Color.

	1899	1907	1919	1931	1943
Cuba	43.2	56.6	61.6	71.7	71.3
Native white	46.7	58.6	62.7	72.0	72.6
Foreign "	70.8	74.4	75.3	81.9	73.3
Colored	28.0	45.0	53.1	64.7	67.4
Pinar del Rio	22.9	39.0	46.4	60.3	62.7
Native white	23.7	38.9	46.6	59.9	63.1
Foreign "	58.5	61.8	72.5	72.3	74.3
Colored	10.2	43.2	40.4	55.8	60.4
Habana	61.3	72.7	76.3	85.8	81.0
Native white	64.6	74.8	76.2	84.8	81.5
Foreign "	80.3	82.6	85.0	90.8	78.0
Colored	40.5	58.5	68.2	82.0	80.0
Matanzas	39.7	52.9	58.8	72.3	75.9
Native white	50.8	60.9	60.4	72.4	75.7
Foreign "	63.4	66.2	67.3	75.0	67.0
Colored	21.5	39.3	53.1	70.6	77.6
Las Villas	38.7	52.0	59.6	68.5	71.0
Native white	42.1	54.3	59.5	67.7	70.9
Foreign "	58.7	61.8	63.4	69.8	64.0
Colored	25.9	43.2	57.5	69.7	72.9
Camaguey	49.1	62.1	64.3	67.6	70.7
Native white	49.4	61.9	64.4	72.7	73.1
Foreign "	67.7	76.1	70.4	79.2	72.1
Colored	42.9	56.4	58.4	51.3	61.7
Oriente	34.2	49.6	53.3	64.4	62.6
Native white	37.1	51.6	57.6	66.8	65.2
Foreign "	67.7	71.8	76.6	84.5	76.3
Colored	26.8	43.0	44.8	57.5	57.9

Source: Census reports for 1899, 1907, 1919, 1931, and 1943.

In Table 2 are shown the data by provinces and color for the various census years. Several points of significance are immediately apparent:

1. There was a steady increase in the literacy rate in Cuba from the beginning of independence to 1931.

2. There

cases the question was "ignored", and that a large proportion of those who fall in this category in the final tabulation, are in reality illiterate, but were not so classed because of attempts to increase the number of possible voters.

2. There was no gain in literacy, so far as the total population was concerned, from 1931 to 1943; although there was a slight gain in the case of the native white and the colored groups.

3. The colored population has made the most marked advance in literacy in the 45 year period, and is now approaching the white rate.

4. In two provinces, Matanzas and Las Villas, the literacy of the colored population was higher than the whites in 1943. It was also higher in Las Villas in 1931, but in all other years and provinces, the colored rate was less than the white.

5. Pinar del Rio and Oriente are the provinces with lowest literacy rates. Habana ranks highest, followed by Matanzas, Las Villas, and Camaguey in that order.

6. While the foreign white population has been consistently higher than the other nativity-color groups, it was very little higher than the native white in 1943, having suffered a marked decline from 1931.

The failure of Cuba to make any gain in literacy during the 12-year period is a somewhat startling revelation in view of the expressed ideals of the revolution which overthrew Machado, and the lofty statements regarding education in the Constitution of 1940. The latter reiterates the dictum that school attendance is compulsory for children from 6 to 13 years, provides that education shall be gratis when furnished by the state, province, or municipality, and that school supplies shall also be free (Art. 48). It sets forth, moreover, that the "nation shall maintain a system of schools for adults devoted particularly to the elimination and prevention of illiteracy; predominantly practical rural schools, organized with a view to the interests of small agricultural, maritime or other communities...." (Art. 49). The apparent devotion to education is further indicated by Article 52 which states that the "budget of the Ministry of Education shall not be less than the ordinary budget of any other Ministry, except in the case of an emergency declared by law."

It is clear from the Census data, however, that the actual implementation of these provisions of the Constitution have been delayed. During the early part of the intercensal period, there was naturally a good deal of disorganization as a consequence of the revolution itself, not to mention the severe economic depression which prevailed at that time. However, there appears little rational explanation for the apparent neglect of education in recent years.

The failure to provide for the education of Cuban children is shown by the literacy figures according to age. Unfortunately the data were not reported comparably by age groups for 1931 to 1943, but rough comparisons can be made.

Table 3. Percentages of Cuban Population in Various Age Groups who were able to Read, by Color, 1943.

Age	All classes		Native White		Foreign White		Colored	
	1931	1943	1931	1943	1931	1943	1931	1943
10		50.2		51.7		76.5		46.1
11	70.5	57.6	69.7	59.0	79.0	76.3	67.4	53.6
12		61.8		63.0		76.9		58.2
13		66.8		68.1		82.5		62.8
14-19	76.3	73.0	75.4	74.1	85.0	82.2	73.7	69.5
20 over	70.4	73.1	71.3	74.5	81.5	73.2	61.7	69.1

1 14-20.
2 21 and over.

For the population under 20 years of age, the literacy rate was considerably lower in 1943 than in 1931. For the native white and colored groups, the younger the age, the lower the rate of literacy reported. This is highly significant because it indicates the condition had been getting progressively worse for several years. To state it another way, if conditions had been improving, the children ten years of age would have shown a higher rate of literacy than those eleven, and so on. If the country had been holding its own in the struggle against illiteracy, there would have been little difference among the different ages. The foreign white group, for example, was probably losing a little ground, when the ten-year olds are compared with those thirteen. However, there was a slight improvement noted in the 10 year olds over the elevens.

Without strenuous efforts at teaching adults to read and write, the literacy rate for the total population will grow steadily worse as the cumulative effect of the neglect of education of younger children manifests itself. The reason that adults in 1943 exceeded in literacy those in 1931, was obviously due to the passage into the adult group during the 12-year period of the children from 10 to 20 in 1931 who had comparatively high literacy rates. The next census will reveal the opposite effect.

That the literacy rate of the colored population is so near that of the white, may be explained largely on the basis of the greater proportions of colored in urban centers. It is in rural areas that education is notoriously neglected, and the rural population of Cuba is predominantly white. That is, a larger proportion of the nation's whites than negroes live in rural areas where schools are poor or do not exist at all.

A word of explanation is in order regarding the foreign white population, which showed a marked decline in literacy from 1931 to 1943. This change is, in a sense, fictitious, because it no doubt results in large measure from the change in definition of "citizenship" which took place during the interim between the two enumerations. The Constitution of 1940 declared everyone born of foreign parents in Cuba to be of Cuban citizenship unless a contrary declaration was made upon reaching 21 years of age. This reversed the previous policy, which held children born in Cuba of foreign parents to be of the same citizenship as the parents. Thus the anomaly of the census of 1931 reporting that over 50 percent of the "foreign-white" population was born in Cuba. Moreover, there was considerable migration of foreigners from the Island during the 1930's, which was probably selective of the upper class elements, who could afford to return to their native lands. No data are at hand to enable us to say more precisely how these factors (change in definition of citizenship and the emigration from the islands during the interim) have influenced the literacy rate, except to cause it to decline.

The most highly rural provinces, Pinar del Rio and Oriente, show the lowest literacy rates, and there can be no doubt that if a strict analysis could be made on the basis of rural-urban segments of the population, a consistently lower rate would be found among the rural groups. In 1931 the literacy rate for the 10 larger cities of Cuba was 91.1, while that for the remainder of the population was 64.4. The corresponding percentages for 1943 were 83.7 for the cities and 68 for the remainder of the population.

The Province of Oriente on the eastern extremity of the Island is the "problem" province in the matter of illiteracy. It contains 28.4 percent of the total population -- being the most populous of the six provinces -- but has 35 percent of the reported illiterates in 1943. The other province with a major proportion (21.4 percent) of the island's illiterates is Las Villas. It has 19.6 percent of the total population. Habana is the most favorably situated. With 26 percent of the population it has only 14.6 percent of the illiterates.

Although Cuba has a considerable distance to go in eradicating illiteracy, it has made rather remarkable progress since the establishment of the Republic. That it stands in a favorable relationship with its sister Latin-American republics is shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Table 4. Illiteracy Rates for Various American Countries.

Country	Year	Percent Illiterate
Canada	1931	3.7
United States	1930	4.3
Argentina	1943	16.6
Chile	1930	27.7
Cuba	1943	22.1
Colombia	1938	43.1
Peru	1940	57.6
Venezuela	1936	61.0
Mexico	1930	61.2
Brasil	1920	64.9

Source: From Estadística: Journal of the Inter-American Institute, Mexico, D. F., September 1945. P 335.

From the previous discussion, however, it is quite clear that Cuba may easily lose its present favorable ranking in the course of the next few years unless efforts are made immediately to improve school attendance of children.

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