

Perspectives on the Cuban National Literacy Campaign

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Appearing before the General Assembly of the United Nations in September, 1960, Cuban President Fidel Castro announced his plans to build a society characterized by equitable access to educational opportunities through the implementation of a massive literacy campaign throughout the island. In this historic address, he informed the world of his ambitious goals:

The Revolutionary Government has built, in that brief period of time [twenty months], 25,000 homes in the rural and urban areas; fifty new towns are springing up now in our country; the largest military fortresses today house tens of thousands of students, and, in the next year, our people plan to wage a great battle against illiteracy with the ambitious goal of teaching every last illiterate person to read and write. To this end organizations of teachers, students, workers, that is, the people as a whole, are preparing themselves for an intense campaign, and Cuba will be the first country in America which, at the end of a few months, will be able to say that it does not have a single illiterate person.

(as cited in Prieto Morales, 1981a, p 32)

During the year-long, massive national effort that was to be the result of Castro's daring declaration, 707,212 people became literate, or achieved a level of reading and writing equivalent to that of a first-grader. Cuba's overall illiteracy rate was reduced from over 20 percent, according to the last census taken before the Revolution, to 3.9 percent, a rate far lower than that of any other Latin American country (Prieto Morales, 1981b).

Perhaps of greater importance to the rapidly evolving nation, however, were the literacy campaign's accomplishments with regard to social justice, solidarity among citizens, and the expression of a political will. The nation-wide illiteracy figure of approximately 23 percent prior to the campaign masks vast differences between urban and rural populations. At that time, illiteracy in the countryside was estimated at 41.7 percent, while in urban areas, primarily Havana, it reached only 11 percent (Jeffries, 1967). The literacy campaign brought together Cubans from the city and Cubans from the country, young and old, comfortable and miserably poor. In a later speech to a group of young literacy teachers who were about to leave for the countryside, Castro declared, "You are going to teach, but as you teach, you will also learn" (as cited in Fagen, 1969, p. 183). This intimate exchange of knowledge and experience among Cubans from different social classes and backgrounds is seen by some as a profound moment of political and moral transformation for the country, indeed as one of the defining events of the Revolution to date (Kozol, 1978b). The creation of a new political culture and the consolidation of the fledgling Revolution required the mobilization of the masses, and the elimination of the existing class structures was facilitated by the outpouring of effort toward the common goal of literacy for all.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the background, implementation and consequences of the Cuban National Literacy Campaign in an effort to discover its role in the promotion of social justice within the context of the Revolution that sought to transform Cuban society.

Cuban Education Prior to the Revolution

Prior to the triumph of Castro's revolutionary forces in 1959, the educational system in Cuba was characterized by gross inequalities regarding access to resources and educational opportunities (Amaro & Mesa-Lago, 1971). During the Batista era of the 1950s, the country was divided into groups of haves and have-nots, and these class differences were clearly exemplified by the fact that wealthy Cubans usually sent their children to elite private schools or to study abroad, while children of the rural proletariat attended vastly inferior public schools or lived too far from any school to attend at all (Leiner, 1981; Paulston, 1971). Children living in the country whose parents were agricultural laborers were five times less likely to finish primary school than were those who had parents with non-manual, salaried jobs (Gillette, 1972).

This system served to perpetuate class differences, since the public schools reflected the upper-class value orientation of those who were in a position to exert any influence over the system. According to Paulston (1971), the schools' primary function was to dispense *cultura*, or status, and public schooling reinforced the transcendental values of the upper class, which, in most cases, had little to do with the daily life of the peasant in the countryside. Disproportionately high levels of illiteracy in rural areas of Cuba was one of the more noticeable by-products of this educational system.

Because illiteracy was seen as a significant factor in the deepening of class differences, it was one of the earliest challenges to be addressed during the first months of the revolutionary government. Just four months after Castro took power in 1959, revolutionary hero Ernesto Ché Guevara spoke to the problem:

There are more illiterates in Cuba today than there were twenty-five years ago, because the whole government educational policy has consisted of embezzling and of building a few insignificant schools at the more central crossroads of the country. Our task is another, *compañeros*; we can rely on the people as a whole. We do not have to go beg for votes by building an insignificant school next to a highway. We are going to put that school where it is needed, where it fulfills its educational function for the people's benefit. (as cited in Prieto Morales, 1981b, p. 32)

Indeed, Castro's rebel army served as an important proving ground for early literacy efforts. When his troops entered Havana in January, 1959, many of the soldiers were illiterate. In response, a Directorate of Culture of the Rebel Army was quickly formed and later became the Department of Education of the Ministry of Armed Forces. Under the direction of this department, all army headquarters, camps and police stations became centers for literacy, and implementation of literacy programs for military personnel began in earnest in February, 1959 (Prieto Morales, 1981b).

Chronology of the National Literacy Campaign

Realizing that an undertaking of such massive proportions would require the mobilization and support of all of the people, Castro and his advisors created the National Literacy

Commission, which sought to involve workers and peasants as well as political organizations in the process of planning the campaign. By the time Castro addressed the United Nations General Assembly in September, 1960, the National Literacy Commission and local literacy boards already had tested the organizational structure needed for the effort and had begun work on the production of primers and training booklets. Additional preparations for the campaign, including the training of the first groups of popular literacy teachers, were likewise well underway (Bhola, 1984).

A special census to locate illiterates was begun in November of 1960. Endeavoring particularly to find illiterate Cubans in remote areas, voluntary census-takers scoured the countryside, using only a one-page questionnaire to determine the level of literacy of each *campesino*. In spite of the reluctance of many to be interviewed by the literacy census-takers, by August of 1961, when the census was officially deemed to have been completed, 985,000 illiterate Cubans had been located (Fagen, 1969).

In a UNESCO study of eight national literacy campaigns throughout the world, Bhola (1984) notes that the Cuban mass campaign of 1961 was marked by its speed and intensity. Between April and December of that year, a total force of 268,420 literacy teachers joined illiterate *campesinos* in their homes, often working with their students in the fields by day and teaching them by lantern-light in the evening. After having declared his intentions to the world, Castro pushed forth the literacy efforts with true revolutionary zeal. In December, 1960, just a few months before the first literacy teachers began their work, Castro's optimism and serious commitment to taking rapid and profound steps toward the eradication of illiteracy were apparent:

Why have we proposed to eradicate illiteracy in only one year? Because the revolution is developing its work as fast as possible and it is pushing forward very fast . . . One year will be enough . . . revolutions are capable of doing things like that. (as cited in Bhola, 1984, p. 94)

To guide them in this enormous undertaking, literacy campaign organizers adopted two fundamental principles:

- 1) If illiterates are to be found among the people, so also are those who can teach literacy; and
- 2) Those who know more must teach those who know less. (Bhola, 1984; Prieto Morales, 1981a; 1981b).

While to some countries, finding a sufficient number of people willing to teach others might present almost insurmountable difficulties, the Cuban leadership chose to place great trust in the people and in their desire to improve the nation. Believing that the ideal teacher-to-student ratio was one-to-two, a more realistic goal was set at a ratio of one teacher to four students. Yet where could such a small nation possibly find over 250,000 literacy workers who were prepared to leave their homes and move to the countryside for eight or more months to teach nearly a million illiterate Cubans? Although over half of the eventual literacy force was composed of adult popular instructors, workers from factories, and professional teachers, approximately 100,000 of

the literacy *brigadistas* were student volunteers, almost all between the ages of ten and nineteen (Kozol, 1978b).

In January, Castro announced that all secondary schools on the island would close on April 15 and that volunteers would be sought from among students who had completed at least the sixth grade. Groups of these student literacy workers would later come to be known as the "Conrado Benítez Brigades," named for an eighteen-year-old youth who had been assassinated by counterrevolutionaries in a remote mountain region while teaching in one of the preliminary literacy efforts. The image of these hordes of youngsters, enthusiastically leaving their comfortable lives in the cities to begin difficult, tedious, and sometimes even dangerous, work in the countryside is one of the key features that distinguishes the Cuban National Literacy Campaign from other mass literacy efforts throughout the world (Fagen, 1969).

On April 15, the first group of 1,000 student volunteers arrived for training at Veradero Beach, a luxurious and well-known resort area not far from Havana. There, the young workers participated in seven days of intensive instruction, as they lived in the elegant former hotels, clubs, and homes of wealthy capitalists from Cuba and the United States who had owned them prior to the triumph of Castro's forces. Ironically, on that first official day of the national campaign, an indiscriminate bombing by Cuban exile forces caused a number of civilian casualties near Havana (Kozol, 1978b). Two days later, Cuban exiles trained and supported by the United States landed on the other side of the island at Playa Girón and launched the invasion that came to be known as the Bay of Pigs.

Despite the serious external military and economic threats, the training sessions continued, and student workers received instruction regarding topics ranging from revolutionary politics to rural nutrition and hygiene. They also were taught to use *Alfabetizamos*, the campaign's official teacher's manual, and *Venceremos*, the student primer. Throughout the training sessions, the young *brigadistas* were taught the importance of sharing equally in the daily work of the rural home. It was believed that only with the growth of solidarity through shared labor would literacy workers be able to develop the motivation and trust necessary for their often much older students to learn to read and write. During May and June, as the need for more trained literacy workers became more apparent, the capacity of the training center at Veradero was expanded to allow for the training of nearly 12,000 students at one time, and by August, more than 105,000 young people had participated in the training program (Fagen, 1969).

Each literacy worker was equipped with the two books, a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a shoulder patch worn as a reminder of Conrado Benítez, and a blanket. Since it was assumed that their host families might not be able to offer them a bed, literacy workers were also given a hammock. Finally, a sophisticated lantern was assigned to each worker. Used to provide light after dark when traveling on country roads as well as to conduct literacy lessons during the evening, this new type of Coleman-type lantern quickly came to be seen as the national symbol of the youth brigades (Kozol, 1978b).

By the end of the summer of 1961, the Cuban "literacy army" was fully mobilized, with 178,000 *alfabetizadores populares* (adult literacy workers teaching primarily in urban areas),

30,000 *brigadistas obreros* (factory and other workers who received their regular salaries while doing literacy work), and 100,000 Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* (students). While most of the literacy teachers from the student and worker groups were living with families in the countryside, the remaining adult teachers did not leave home and volunteered their time outside of their normal working and family responsibilities. During the middle of the year, the help of other revolutionary and mass organizations was recruited, and groups such as the Confederation of Cuban Workers, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the Association of Small Farmers, and the Federation of Cuban Women joined in the effort (Fagen, 1969).

In September, more than 800 members of national, provincial, and municipal literacy councils, representatives of many of the mass organizations, and a number of revolutionary leaders met at the Havana Libre Hotel (formerly the Havana Hilton) to evaluate the efficacy of the National Literacy Campaign to that point. Having set a clear goal of teaching nearly a million people to read and write within the year, organizers met to determine what additional measures needed to be taken in order to reach that goal. While a massive teaching force had been recruited and trained, and over three quarters of the million located illiterates had begun to study, only 119,000 of them had passed the literacy test and were listed as having become literate (Fagen, 1969).

Disappointed by these results, the government took several more extreme measures aimed toward accelerating the literacy efforts. The decision was made to delay the opening of the new school year from September until January so that members of the Conrado Benítez Brigade could continue their work and the direct participation of school teachers in the campaign could be made mandatory. This, in effect, meant that most of Cuba's schools remained closed for a total of eight months during 1961, since the school year had been brought to a close two months early in the spring. In order to provide alternate activities for the many young Cuban children who were out of school during the fall, parents and other volunteers were recruited to carry out a special "plan of attendance," or *plan asistencial* (Bhola, 1984; Fagen, 1969). While there are no records to offer help in assessing the value of these activities or the effects of this time away from school on the children, the closing of Cuban schools in the fall of 1961 clearly demonstrates that the government chose to make the stated goals of the National Literacy Campaign its highest educational priority at the time.

In support of the effort to reach the goal of the campaign, special acceleration camps were established. Adult learners who had fallen behind in their studies were brought to these camps to spend entire days working with more experienced teachers. Special study coaches were sent to adult learners who could not come to the camps. These study coaches, though few in number, were credited with motivating not only those who were learning but those who were teaching in remote locations under difficult circumstances (Bhola, 1984; Fagen, 1969).

In November and December, the campaign progressed at a furious pace. Young brigadistas were promised scholarships, study coaches intensified their efforts, and communities engaged in friendly competition with one another to become the first *Territorio Libre de Analfabetismo* (Territory Free of Illiteracy). When the last illiterate member of a family passed the literacy tests, the family was entitled to hang a red flag above the doorway of the house. After

the last house in a town had raised the flag, then the town itself could raise a larger flag and declare itself free of illiteracy. The first town to raise such a flag was Melena del Sur, a village in Havana Province, which earned the right on November 5, 1961 (Kozol, 1978b). The final three weeks of the campaign were characterized by a particular sense of both urgency and sadness. Another young *brigadista*, Manuel Ascunce Domenech was murdered by counterrevolutionary bands in the Escambray Mountains. Speeches by revolutionary leaders then urged literacy workers to avenge Ascunce's death by working as hard as possible during the final few weeks of the campaign.

On December 22, Castro triumphantly declared the entire island a Territory Free of Illiteracy at a mass rally in Havana's *Plaza de la Revolución*, following a week of celebration by thousands of the literacy workers. An organized march through the streets of Havana and an emotional speech by Fidel marked the end of the one-year campaign, which officially claimed to have made 707,212 Cubans literate (Bhola, 1984). Seen by many as one of the greatest accomplishments of the Revolution, even Castro's harshest critics could not deny that a pedagogical event of tremendous proportions had taken place.

Methods Utilized in the Campaign

The methods employed during the National Literacy Campaign, both to recruit and motivate literacy workers and to carry out the actual instruction, reflected the political ideology of the revolutionary government. Castro's declaration that "revolutions are capable of doing things like that" set the tone for the intensity of the campaign as well as the techniques utilized by it. However, it should be pointed out that the campaign was begun before the revolutionary government ever called itself Marxist or socialist and that perhaps the ideological solidification of the people was both an end in itself and a means by which the literacy effort attained its ambitious goals.

What were the specific means by which young literacy workers were motivated to leave their homes and their families to undertake months of arduous work in the countryside? Kozol (1978a; 1978b) argues that the spirit of the revolution and the relief it provided from the inequities and patronage of the Batista regime excited young people, and the literacy campaign offered them an opportunity to participate in an adventure in the mountains somehow akin to those experienced by their heroes Ché and Fidel. The charismatic nature of Fidel as well as the openly exuberant and declarative propaganda characteristic of post-revolutionary Cuba urged everyone to participate and no doubt added to the fervor of young supporters of the even younger revolutionary government.

Mobilization efforts indeed made use of large quantities of "propaganda", although this word in Cuba has none of the negative connotations often associated with it in the English language (Kozol, 1978b). An example of this type of propaganda aimed at recruiting literacy workers is a poster that was hung all over the island which read:

**YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN --
JOIN THE ARMY OF YOUNG LITERACY WORKERS!**

THE HOME OF A FAMILY OF PEASANTS
WHO CANNOT EITHER READ OR WRITE
IS WAITING FOR YOU NOW
DON'T LET THEM DOWN!
(Bhola, 1984; Kozol, 1978a; 1978b)

A politically ironic example of a subtler form of propaganda can also be found, yet to fully appreciate it, we need to remind ourselves that Cuba had not yet declared itself socialist during the recruitment phase of the literacy campaign. Though it is not clear if the company freely chose to participate in the literacy effort, a Coca-Cola advertisement in Cuba pointed out that citizens needed "the pause that refreshes" and urged them to use that pause "In Order to Teach a Family to Read and Write." According to Fagen (1969), (as cited in Kozol, 1978b), the illustration on the advertisement showed the white hand of a lady of the household carefully working the darker hand of a domestic worker through the alphabet.

Cuban teaching methods and materials differed from those used in any other mass literacy campaign. Describing the most significant requirements for the primer chosen, Abel Prieto Morales (1981b), a key figure in the campaign, explained:

We decided that in addition to the appropriate didactic method adult illiterates required a book whose contents would reflect reality, offer information on the revolutionary changes, and awaken in people the desire to know more by reading. The *Venceremos* primer was based on this premise, in which the content and method were in harmony. The primer covers fifteen topics, each corresponding to a matter of national interest, to a qualitative change in society brought about by the Revolution, or to the political-social content, which also fulfills an educational-cultural function.(35)

Each of the fifteen lessons of the primer was based on a motivational theme connected to the economic and social reforms that were taking place in the country at the time. Titles of some of the lessons were: OEA (Organization of American States); INRA (National Institute of Agrarian Reform); The Revolution; Fidel is our Leader; The Land is Ours; The Co-operatives; Racial Discrimination; and Housing Rights. The primer taught learners to recognize and to write both printed and cursive letters and stressed the building of words from syllables and the building of sentences from words (Bhola, 1984).

Kozol (1978a; 1978b) reports that literacy workers were trained to be firm and clear with their students but particularly to avoid the condescending and authoritarian approaches common in pre-revolutionary formal teaching. Instructors were to begin each lesson with an informal discussion based on the photograph accompanying the lesson. The photographs were chosen to touch upon the emotions and interests of the *campesinos* and provided a starting point for oral and written expression. Specific steps for teaching each lesson were outlined as follows:

First step: Conversation

Conversation between the brigadista and the pupil in regard to the photograph within the primer . . .

- a) To find out what the pupil knows about the subject of the photo.
- b) To provoke oral expression.
- c) To clarify the concepts.

Second step: Reading

A complete reading of the text (block letters) that appears beside the photo:

- a) First, by the teacher: slowly and clearly.
- b) Second, by the teacher and the pupil at the same time.
- c) Third, by the pupil all alone . . .

Third step: Practice and Exercise

- a) Sight recognition of a phrase or sentence that has been selected.
- b) Break-up of that phrase or sentence into syllables.
- c) Examination of each syllable within an exercise.

(from the *Orientaciones* guidebook for *brigadistas*, as cited in Kozol, 1978b)

The approach stressed the mastering of specific sounds by repetition and practice with the teacher until they could be produced independently. After pupils were able to read each lesson on their own, then emphasis was placed on syllabification.

Instructors recorded each student's progress by administering initial, intermediate, and final tests. The purpose of the first test was to determine whether the student was illiterate or semi-literate, which was defined by the ability to read the first three items on the test but with no ability to write. The second test was used to monitor progress and to provide additional information to *brigadistas* joining the learning situation later or brought in to substitute in the case of illness or other discontinued service. The final test was based on the last lesson of the primer, and passing the test signified that literacy had been gained. One final piece of evidence that a person had learned to read and write was required: each newly literate person was to write a personal letter to Fidel Castro. These letters provided Castro with concrete evidence that literacy workers had succeeded and offered a more living chronicle of the literacy work than any number of statistics could possibly disclose. The following is an example of one such letter, in its original Spanish with an English translation:

Dotor Fidel Castro Ruz

Estimado Compañero le Ago esta para darle A Conocer que ya yo se leer y
Escribir Grasia A nuestra Revolución Socialista y demacratICA por eso es que yo le Ago
esta para que Uste la Vea cón Sus propios hojos. Mas me despido cón un fuerte Saludo
Rebalusionario y democratico

Era Analfabeta
Alfabetizador

Felicia Carpio Barcelo
Wilfredo Neyra R.

PATRIA O MUERTE
Alfabetizando Venceremo

Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz,

Dear Comrade: I write this to let you know that I now know how to read and write thanks to our Socialist and democratic Revolution. That's why I'm writing to you, so that you can see with your own eyes. I take leave with a firm Revolutionary and democratic salute.

I used to be illiterate. Felicia Carpio Barcelo
Literacy worker Wilfredo Neyra R.

FATHERLAND OR DEATH
Doing literacy work, we will triumph
(Fagen, 1969, pp. 58, 245)

Ideology and the Literacy Campaign

In a study of eight mass literacy campaigns, Bhola (1984) stresses that "political will is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for a successful mass literacy campaign" (179). As has been clearly demonstrated, both the political will and the emerging socialist ideology of the revolutionary government permeated all aspects of the Cuban National Literacy Campaign of 1961. While a belief in this particular ideology may not be shared by all who read these words, it cannot be denied that the ebullience and political fervor engendered by the revolutionary leaders provided the impetus for the campaign and sustained its workers in their tireless efforts to attain the formidable goal that had been set for them. Bhola (1984) points out as well that "socialist and revolutionary societies have been able to create and sustain the political will necessary to launch and implement successful mass literacy campaigns;" (180) however, there is no reason not to believe that any society capable of a high degree of ideological commitment could find means by which the strength and determination of its people could be tapped to accomplish similar results.

As mentioned earlier, it was necessary for a socialist state to strive quickly toward the elimination of illiteracy because it clearly reinforced class differences and provided a justification for the excessive privileges of the exploiting classes. By design and as actually implemented, the campaign created a new awareness among urban youth, who gained a much more complete recognition of the position of the rural worker in the economic development of the nation, which, no doubt, brought about a fuller understanding of the basic tenets of socialism (Bhola, 1984). Capitalizing upon the process of restructuring which the rapidly changing revolutionary state was undertaking at the time, campaign organizers found the time ripe for new visions and profound transformation of the national character. In short, Cuba was forging its own order of socialism.

Ideology evidently played a role even in the analyses of the Cuban National Literacy Campaign carried out by international organizations such as UNESCO. In Children of the

Revolution (1978a), a passionate and openly sympathetic account of the campaign, Jonathan Kozol also describes the findings of his research on the literacy efforts undertaken by UNESCO during the 1960s. Spending thirty-two million dollars, UNESCO attempted eleven literacy projects in developing countries. Kozol charges that ensuing UNESCO publications were somewhat less than straightforward when addressing the obvious lack of success of these efforts. Quoting an anonymous scholar, who stated that UNESCO "tried to stonewall its complete defeat" (73), Kozol implies that pressures from funding agencies may have led UNESCO to withhold the full truth regarding the failure of its projects.

Recognizing that studying the mass campaign undertaken in Cuba might shed some light on the difficulties encountered during the unsuccessful UNESCO efforts, the organization charged Dr. Anna Lorenzetto, an Italian scholar, with conducting a study of the Cuban project. According to Kozol (1978a), Lorenzetto's study was "a strong, enthusiastic comment on the literacy campaign, giving full recognition to the ideological bias of the primer and the militant preparation of the brigadistas" (74). Kozol goes on to charge that UNESCO, obviously embarrassed by Lorenzetto's resounding endorsement of the methods employed in the Cuban campaign and the success that was achieved by them, did its best to suppress the work of Dr. Lorenzetto. UNESCO officially lists her full report, printed in 1965, though it was never made readily available to the public.

Furthermore, UNESCO rejected the request when Cuba asked for the report to be made available to scholars attending an international literacy conference in Teheran in 1965. Dr. Raúl Ferrer, vice-coordinator of the Cuban campaign and a member of the Cuban delegation to the Teheran conference, had anticipated the reluctance of UNESCO to disseminate the study and brought with him 500 copies of the document, which he distributed to every delegation as they arrived at the doorway of the auditorium in which the conference was taking place. While stopping short of accusing UNESCO of hiding the success of the Cuban literacy campaign purely due to ideological differences, Kozol seems to be implying that Lorenzetto's understanding of the campaign as an expression of the political will of the people and her endorsement of the social and cultural objectives of the Cuban efforts contributed heavily to the suppression of her findings by UNESCO. It should be pointed out here, however, that Kozol indicates that the character of the organization changed radically for the better in subsequent years. In support of this view, we should note also that the study undertaken by Bhola and published by UNESCO in 1984 (cited frequently in this paper) clearly praises the success of the Cuban campaign and openly credits the political will of the young revolutionary society and the ideological fervor of its people as primary reasons for that success.

In a broader sense, the ideology reflected by the Cuban National Literacy Campaign might be identified with the well-known approach to literacy work taken by Paulo Freire (1970), a Brazilian educator who taught from a Christian-Marxist perspective. Much like Freire and his colleagues, Cuban literacy workers undertook a "conscientization" process, or sought to awaken the minds of their students to the oppression that had pervaded their lives, through their revolutionary teachings. As in Brazil, charged or active words and images were used to help to create a dialogical relationship between the teacher and the learner. The differences between the approaches, however, were less subtle than they might appear to be on the surface. In Cuba, the

primer was much more explicit with regard to political topics; Freire favored a slower, discovery approach to the selection of active, generative themes (Kozol, 1978b). While the peasant learners in Brazil eventually generated topics very similar to those set forth in the primer in Cuba, the process was of paramount importance to Freire. In Cuba, the urgency of the Revolution and the economic and military threats posed by the United States engendered a much more direct and politically charged approach to the problem of illiteracy.

Criticisms of the Campaign

At least two serious criticisms have been leveled against the Cuban mass literacy campaign, in spite of its undeniable success in terms of basic literacy. Of course, first among these is the charge that the political overtones of the campaign were simply too obvious, in short, that Cuba did not take a "value-free" approach to the eradication of illiteracy. Proponents of this view argue that gains made during the campaign must be viewed as political rather than pedagogical accomplishments. Kozol (1978b) answers this criticism by pointing out that all educational ventures everywhere are politicized to a great extent and that "education which is financed, governed, and directed by the state will logically seek to propagate the values of that state" (364). While the methods employed to do so in countries such as the United States are clearly more subtle, a growing body of highly-regarded literature (i.e., the works of Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Ivan Illich and others), supports the view that less obvious political indoctrination permeates our educational system and has a profound influence on our youth and society at large.

A second major criticism involves the militaristic character of the campaign. Student workers were organized into "brigades," wore uniforms and took oaths, and "liberated" villages from illiteracy. The title of the primer, *Venceremos*, which means "We will overcome" or "We will conquer," reflects a military tone, although it is well understood that the enemy in this case is illiteracy. A section of the hymn sung by *brigadistas* in the countryside, however, includes reference to yet another enemy: "Down with imperialism, up with liberty! We carry with the words the light of truth." (Bhola, 1984, p. 96).

In order to better understand the military tone underlying the literacy campaign, it is important to place the project in its proper historical context. A siege mentality existed in Cuba at the time, as it does yet today. During the early days of the literacy campaign, two separate military attacks were made on the island, including the well-known Bay of Pigs invasion. Furthermore, there was a very real danger of attacks on *brigadistas* by counterrevolutionary forces based in the mountains, as evidenced by the murders of Conrado Benítez and Manuel Ascunce Domenech. While undoubtedly distasteful to residents of the United States who have never faced the likelihood of attacks from foreign enemies on home soil, the militaristic tone of the literacy campaign was a reflection of Cuba's political reality and the frequent external aggressions waged against the island at that time.

Conclusions

In January, 1997, I spoke in Cuba with Irene Ruíz Narvaez, a journalist from Havana who had been a member of the Conrado Benítez Brigade at the age of 16, some 36 years earlier. She spoke with great passion and humility about her experiences teaching people to read and write in a small village in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Although officially it was prohibited for female *brigadistas* to teach in the Sierra Maestra because of the danger posed by counterrevolutionary groups, Irene was able to convince literacy officials as well as her parents to allow her to live and work in this remote region.

To Irene, serving as a *brigadista* in the National Literacy Campaign was a life-transforming experience. "I was a child, and I became a woman," she explained (personal communication, January 23, 1997). Finding it difficult to understand why Cuba had been attacked by the United States, Irene struggled with the decision to go into the mountains where her life might be in danger. Yet the immense societal changes that were occurring in her country at the time invigorated her, and she was eager to have an opportunity to participate actively in the political transformation of the island.

Irene spoke little of teaching her students. "I helped them learn to think, to become aware of the world around them," she said, "but they don't know how much I learned from them!" (personal communication, January 23, 1997) Confirming that perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the literacy campaign was the building of solidarity between urban youth and rural *campesinos*, Irene spoke emotionally of her love for her students and the young people of the village. When she returned to Havana eight months later, she understood what it really meant to do physical labor in the countryside, and her morning cup of coffee in the city had acquired an entirely different meaning.

Although the political bent, militaristic tone and even the significance of the results of the Cuban National Literacy Campaign could be debated, it must be recognized that the project indeed was a life-transforming experience for thousands of individuals like Irene Ruíz and Felicia Carpio, whose letter to Fidel declaring herself literate was included earlier in this paper. Says René Mujica (1981), another student *brigadista*:

If I look into myself, or if I am asked about the most important single experience in my life, I have to say that it was the literacy campaign, because it was this event which has most profoundly affected my individual beliefs. Even though I came from a family in the city with very modest means, it put me in contact with a kind of poverty, a kind of reality which I never had dreamed could exist in this world. (224)

Together, literacy teachers and the rural workers who most often were their students took a significant step toward the transformation of a society once marked by vast class and economic differences. Together, they made progress toward the building of a more equitable class structure for their country.

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