

EARLY LITERACY IN CUBA: LESSONS FOR AMERICA

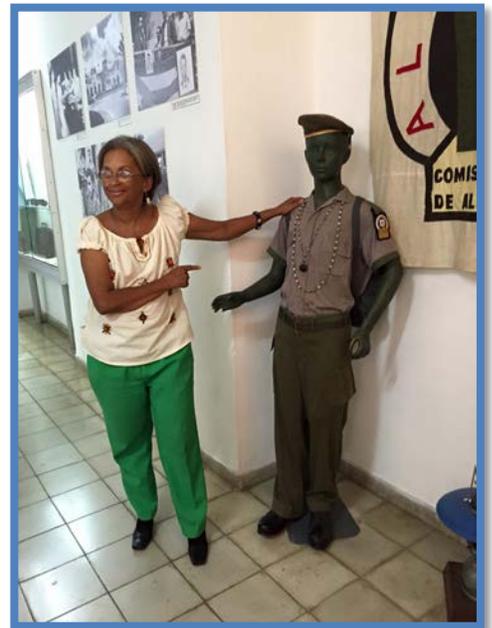
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ABSTRACT

How did Cuba erase illiteracy in a single year? How did they combine both a phonics approach with the constructivist meaning-based model for teaching reading that we cannot seem to manage here in the states? This paper seeks to shed light on Cuba's impressive 1961 National Literacy Campaign and reflects upon implications for early literacy development in America.

INTRODUCTION

Our interest in the 1961 mass literacy campaign began during a visit to Cuba as part of a “Cuba at a Crossroads” tour sponsored by the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME). We visited the Literacy Campaign Museum in Havana where history professor and museum director Luisa Campos Gallardo (right) told us about the thousands of volunteers as young as age 10 who were recruited, trained, and then sent into the country side to teach reading and writing. We viewed artifacts such as workbooks and student letters to Castro providing evidence of the newly acquired literacy skills (Duiguid, 2015). Ms. Gallardo had every reason to sing the praises of her country. Even our bus driver beamed with pride as his mother’s name was revealed among the contributors to this amazing historical campaign. Can America learn some lessons from Cuba? The short answer is “yes.” According to Pressley and Allington (2014, p. 5), teachers would do well to integrate “skills and holistic instruction” and move beyond the reading wars. The long answer is more complex and is the topic of this paper.



DEFINING LITERACY

There are many dimensions to literacy. Defined often as decoding and understanding of text involving skills of word recognition, reading fluency, comprehension, writing, and spelling (Shanahan et al., 2008, p. vii), literacy has been related to heightened moral and intellectual categories (Graff, 2008), moral fortitude (Pattison, 1982), honor, and spiritual enlightenment, even inhabiting a *state of grace* (Scribner, 1988, p. 77). In complementary fashion, illiteracy is a “focal feature” of social injustice and deprivation (Sen, 1999, p. 103), a pervasive characteristic of poverty, and one factor in the inability “to form social relationships on a basis of equality with others and to achieve the important social good of self-respect” (Nussbaum, 2003, p.335). Literacy can promote

employment, democracy, economic growth, political stability, social harmony, and competitiveness in world markets (Levine, 1986; Graff, 1987). It is thought that as conceptions of what counts as *literacy* are adapted to context and culture, no universal model is completely justifiable. This holds true for how one may demonstrate his or her literacy levels and includes a wide range of strategies to help us teach reading. Given these dimensions, there arise questions of cultural literacy—what a certain culture expects a literate person to know in a given country in order to participate fully and thrive. There is also proof of literacy—how one demonstrates literacy achievement. Are you literate if you can read your name or a sentence, or do you need to understand what you read? And once these are defined, how do we teach others to be literate?

THE CUBAN EXPERIENCE

The context in which the Cuban literacy campaign took place is important. In 1953, six years before the Castro revolution, 76% of the Cuban population over 10 years of age were literate (Breidlid, 2007, p. 619). Corruption and discrimination, however, marginalized many. In effect, the country was divided into haves and have-nots. Wealthy Cubans sent their children to elite private schools or to study abroad while children of rural wage-earners attended vastly inferior public schools or lived too far from any school to attend at all. “Disproportionately high levels of illiteracy in rural areas of Cuba were one of the more noticeable by-products of this educational system” (Supko, 1998, p. 2). 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 (Supko, 1998), and illiteracy in the countryside was estimated at 41.7 percent (Jeffries, 1967).

Following the revolution, in September 1960, Fidel Castro addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations and announced a massive campaign “to combat ignorance and illiteracy on his island” (Dorn & Ghodsee, 2012, p. 386). The campaign was consistent with the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s* (UNESCO) long-standing support for global mass literacy campaigns. However, confronted by intensive U.S. lobbying to reduce their emphasis on universal literacy and to focus instead upon economic modernization, UNESCO abandoned its position and adopted a *functional literacy* approach stressing “general education, technical or vocational training” (Jones, 1990, p. 54), which helps define the literacy claim that Cuba would eventually make.

On March 17, 1960, President Eisenhower had authorized the CIA to organize, train, and equip Cuban refugees to overthrow Castro. In 1961, under the new Kennedy administration and just two days after the first training camp for the mass literacy campaign volunteers opened, the United States launched the Bay of Pigs invasion. As the U.S. attack failed, the numbers of volunteers to the reading campaign swelled (The Independent, 2010) and the campaign took on a spiritual aspect that inspired popular devotion, a sense of duty, and feelings of pride and accomplishment among participants, their families, and the public at large.

This massive campaign mobilized more than 200,000 *facilitators*, both young and old, who targeted the marginalized (economically, socially, and physically) and discriminated neither in terms of gender, nor race, nor sexual orientation (Breidlid, 2007, p. 620, 622). In under one year’s time, the Cuban government managed to reduce a national illiteracy rate to less than four percent (Dorn & Ghodsee, 2012, p. 386), and the whole country was declared a “territory free of illiteracy” by UNESCO in 1964 (Breidlid, 2007, p. 621). By 2003, Cuba’s youth literacy rate for the ages of 15 to 24 was 99.8% (Hernandez-Truyol, 2004). Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, a culture for learning had been achieved:

Since generations of Cubans have been socialized into understanding the merits of education through general literacy and schooling up to a certain level they have internalized an attitude to schooling which to some extent bridges the potential cultural gap between home and school (Breidlid, 2007, p. 631).

During our trip to Cuba, we saw evidence of this in most everyone we met; even the woman conducting our bus tour had earned several degrees and continued her (free) education with much enthusiasm and pride. In brief, there is some justification to the claim that “Cuba’s competence ... in the field of literacy is unrivalled” (Breidlid, 2007, p. 222, 630) as this initial campaign was followed by a dramatic expansion of education at all levels.

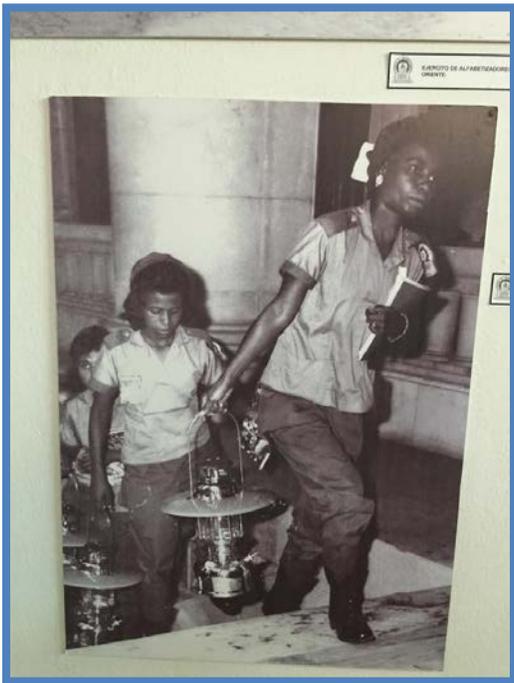
THE CUBAN APPROACH

Castro’s mass literacy campaign actually began prior to the revolution. As the rebel army gained territory, it established local literacy boards and organized schools for children and soldiers in each locality that it liberated. This provided an initial structure throughout the country upon which the newly formed government could build. Synergy between structural elements and ideological fervor evident in every aspect of the literacy campaign. The government provided simple basic teaching supplies to volunteers and workers, who traveled to rural locations. Each literacy worker was equipped with two textbooks (*We Shall Read* and *We Shall Conquer*), a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a blanket, a lantern (so that lessons could be given at night after work ended and which became one national symbol of the campaign), a hammock, and a shoulder patch commemorating Conrado Benítez, a young volunteer teacher killed

by anti-Castro guerrillas (Supko, 1998; *The Independent*, 2010). Sharing equally in the daily work of the rural home, the volunteers promoted solidarity through shared labor, and this enabled the workers to develop the motivation and trust necessary for historically marginalized students to learn to read and write what was personally relevant and important to them.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Significant research suggests that the Cuban “Yes, I Can” model, as applied both in and outside of Cuba in mass literacy campaigns, provides an inter-culturally recognizable form of literacy that does not ignore local literacy practice and is contextualized and adapted easily to local circumstances and realities. “In fact, the degree of local control exercised by facilitators and participants, which is one of the model’s strengths, makes it almost inevitable that people will *take hold* (Maddox, 2007) of literacy during the campaign in ways that accord with their own cultures and histories” (Broughton & Durnan, 2014, p. 575). Such pedagogy connected with students’ language and experience promotes an interest and



ownership for learning that utilize personally relevant contexts and materials and are reflected in the roots of whole language approaches to literacy instruction and ought to be of interest to educators in America (Goodman, 1989; Husserl, 1970).

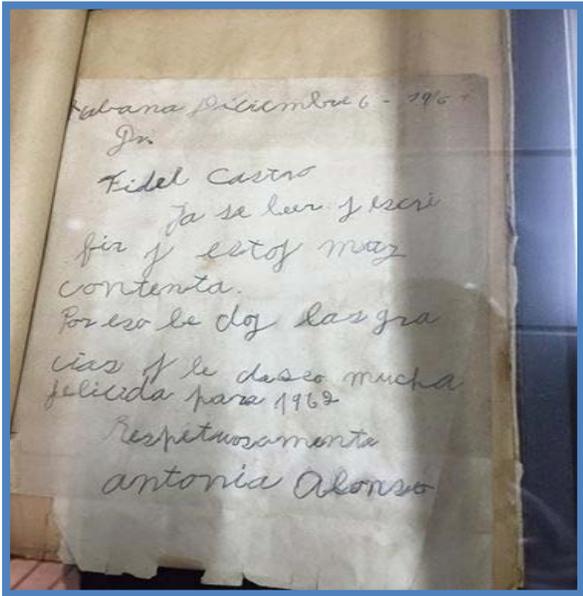
As this literature, the context of the literacy crusade, and the Cuban approach suggest, the literacy campaign's success was clearly no miracle. It was the consequence of a governmental policy that organized, managed, and led masses of people in an impressive effort requiring hard work, persistence, motivation, and a singular dedication. Literacy came to be a means not only of raising peasant and worker pride but also of enhancing the public's awareness of how politics and economics had determined who learned what and how under Castro's Cuba politics, and how economics could serve the *people* and their social goals rather than the interests and needs of economic and political elites (Griffiths & Williams, 2002, p. 37).

All of this was reinforced by a pedagogy exhibiting qualities familiar to the whole language constructivist philosophy that emphasizes making personal meaningful connections with text (Bomengen, 2010); pictures depicting everyday scenes to which people could relate were employed and students would read, write, and discuss these relevant topics. Moreover, the symbolic thank-you letters to Fidel were kept along with photographs and details of all volunteers in a museum situated in the former Batista Havana headquarters; included was a carefully constructed literacy primer that taught peasants the value and importance of the revolution as part of their literacy programming. Consequently, the Cuban people began to understand mass education as a means to personal and national emancipation and so solidified their dedication to the power of the revolutionary political resolve that undergirded the revolution (Dorn and Ghodsee, 2012, p. 386). Students understood themselves as critical participants in something bigger than themselves—as the future youthful agents required for the transformation of society. Although such a comprehensive determined promotion of ideology would not be so easily replicated in American classrooms, important motivational elements of personalizing lessons and teacher, student, and even parent investment should be considered.

AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

During the campaign, teacher and student motivation and ownership in the process were significant (Kamil et al, 2008). Perhaps such teacher buy-in was missing during much of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) movement in America, which explains a fatal flaw in our own school efforts to improve literacy (Cooper, 2015). The top-down strong-arm approach of accountability through NCLB, employing sticks over carrots with little time, money, and opportunity for teachers to shift focus and fully understand and embrace what they were being asked to do, may have reduced the effectiveness NCLB might otherwise have enjoyed.

What other variables were at work during the Cuban campaign? We asked how literacy achievement was defined and what type of instruction was used when 100% literacy that first year. We were directed to sample letters that had been placed under the glass at the museum providing



evidence of the newly acquired literacy skills. One letter addressed to Fidel Castro on December 6 says, “I can read and write and I am very happy about it. That is why I give you thanks and I wish you a lot of happiness in 1962.” These sentences written in Spanish are simple, even a word is misspelled, and yet the writer clearly can write and read a simple message; this is essentially a first grade literacy level that had been minimally achieved by all when declaring 100% literacy for the country (Lorenzetto & Neys, 1964, p.72). To provide some perspective, this basic level of literacy can also be seen in American first grade classrooms. If America gauged literacy rates using these minimum levels, the literacy rate of the US would be much higher than we are usually told. However, it is uncertain if the US could reach 100% literacy even by that definition achieved in Cuba in that single year, which is truly impressive.

When making the claim that only 35% of 4th graders in the U.S. are considered proficient in reading (Kena et al., 2015), the reference is to a much higher level of competence typically expected of 4th grade students as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in describing the national literacy level of our country. The NAEP is a moving target, however, which strives to measure literacy in the US as it changes to meet increasing (functional) demands over time—the complex level needed to participate fully in American society (“NAEP,” 2015). While UNESCO is currently working through the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) to move the original global determination of literacy from the simple answer of YES to a survey question asking, “Can you read and write,” to a more valid and reliable one that more accurately establishes literacy trends across the globe in terms of reading and comprehending more sophisticated text (“UNESCO,” 2014), we do not yet have statistics we may use reliably to determine literacy rates comparing Cuba and the US at this time (“The World Fact Book,” 2015). The ones we have must always be qualified and understood contextually.

But there is more. Children learn to read in ways that support the language they speak. For example, if they speak Chinese or Japanese, they learn to read symbols in the form of images that are quite complex; memorization plays a big role in learning to read and write these languages and memory overload becomes a problem for some. Spanish, which is spoken in Cuba, is easier to read and write than English because while both rely on an alphabetic code, Spanish has a more direct letter-sound match (McGuinness 2004, p. 39). Many of the letters in Spanish predictably link to reliable speech streams, and young readers can expect this letter-sound match when applying the alphabetic principle (sounding out words as they attempt to read the exciting personally relevant messages in front of them). These language differences can influence the ease and success with which literacy develops.

According to Emeritus Professor Diane McGuinness (2005), when we talk with each other in English, we use only about 44 sounds. If you put a letter (symbol) to each speech sound (phoneme), it becomes a simple language to read and write. These letter-sound units are referred to as “the code.” When there is a significant direct letter-sound match, we call it a “transparent” alphabetic

system—a good code. In countries that have transparent alphabetic languages (e.g., Cuba, Germany, Spain, Italy, most Scandinavian countries), children learn to read and write in only a year’s time, and dyslexia (difficulty learning to read) is rare (McGuiness 2005, p. 2-3).

The Anglo-Saxons designed the first written code for English. It was considered a good code—nearly perfect with one letter for each sound spoken in the language (McGuiness 2004, p. 39). However, English has been invaded, supported, adopted, and modified so many times in so many ways by so many different cultures and languages that, as everyone knows, English has become quite complex and now rather difficult to read and write. Languages that use letters to represent sounds, yet develop over a long period of time, are considered “opaque” alphabetic languages (lacking strong consistency between letters and sounds). While we may have one of the most robust languages in the world, which can facilitate impressive levels of communication, English represents five languages with their spelling systems superimposed on one another and it is typical for a single letter such as “a” to make a different sound in each of these words—*cat, car, cage, caught, care, alter, about* (McGuiness, 2004, p. 41). This difference alone will make it more difficult to learn to read and write in English.

Regardless, such basic skill foundations in letter-phoneme connections are still critical first steps toward full literacy development in any alphabetic language, even opaque ones, and this affords students a solid rock upon which all future learning will build (“NELP,” 2008). Without this earliest concrete foundational layer, as with learning any new skill, future reading and writing skills may not flourish, and we cannot then begin the transformational force toward providing this social justice for all.

VARIATIONS IN PEDAGOGY

This brings us to the way reading is taught. Because Spanish is a transparent alphabetic language with an easy letter-sound match, there is no discussion in Cuba about whether or not to “sound out” the words; they do not have the reading wars that we have here in America (Reyhner, 2008; Strauss, 2013). Spanish lends itself easily to using the alphabetic principle (one of the five early reading skills discovered by the NRP that appear to have predictive validity for future reading success in emerging readers even in America). Children who learn to read in Spanish can experience immediate success sounding out simple words that quickly branch into multisyllable words, which extend meaning and provide practice building fluency as the larger chunks of the smaller phonics patterns are repeated over and over. During our visit, it was clear that Cuba fully understood the importance of building fluency by articulating how they taught the basic phonics elements and then encouraged students to read often to family members to build this quick automatic word recognition. The NRP and most teachers now recognize the importance of building fluency for American readers as well, but there is not always teacher agreement on how much phonics to include nor how best to teach it in the early years due to the opaque nature of the English language.

While the National Reading Panel revealed the importance of teaching the alphabetic principle to our youngest readers (looking closely at print and sounding out words), and then giving students opportunities to apply and practice it to develop the fluency (NRP Subgroups, 2000), we still have many well-meaning teachers of beginning readers who, in their attempt to help children focus on meaning, may over-promote guessing at words by reading pictures and using context clues at the expense of helping students respect and use the alphabetic principle and basic phonics patterns which can be useful even in an opaque alphabetic language such as English. Thus opportunities to learn a tricky code that needs to be taught with care and practiced early in their reading career is

reduced for these children (McGuinness, 2004, p. 41; SEDL, 2015). Teachers in America need to develop a greater respect for the full range of reading research which will help them recognize the critical (phonics) window is short and targeted to beginning reading instruction for all alphabetic languages no matter how transparent or opaque they may be (Pearson, 2004, p. 239); this is especially important for children who depend upon schools to become literate (Hiebert, 2008, p. 14). Moreover, learning the code in an explicit and systematic manner can be fun using interactive hands-on word building activities (Beck & Beck, 2013), and the engaging personally relevant whole language approach of constructing meaning and acting with purpose may be nicely woven simultaneously to improve early literacy development (Pearson, 2004, p.245; Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 1). Cuba clearly integrated both.

LESSONS FOR AMERICA

Although the Cuban campaign is, for many reasons, not applicable directly or in detail to the United States, there are some broader lessons that might be taken. The Cuban experience suggests that motivation through ownership and a culture for learning plus a determined focus on foundational skill development within a flexible context during early literacy acquisition are key in overcoming the debilitating effects on educational success of poverty, ignorance, and marginalization—a challenge faced in America, as well (Coley & Baker, 2013). To motivate and provide ownership for both teacher and student, the Cuban government offered a transcendent, inspirational, and deeply meaningful purpose; the opportunity to master a skill that could directly serve that purpose; and the flexibility necessary to adapt the means of education to the context of the student. Teachers were provided with initial basic guidance and then allowed to tackle the project in ways that met the requirements of students and exigencies of the contexts into which they were placed. Both students and teachers were presented with opportunities to become better at something that mattered to them through tasks that were neither overly difficult nor overly simple (Atherton, 2013). Skills were carefully and incrementally taught and practiced, yet always in the context of something meaningful and personally relevant to the student. Most importantly, the campaign took advantage of the natural desire to contribute to a cause greater and more enduring than one's self by ensuring that students and teachers knew and understood the social purpose, a kind of cultural literacy all would respect and acquire. Student and teacher goals were focused on the transcendent purpose as well as the personal advantages that literacy would bring. With literacy foundations in place through repetition and opportunities for fluency building through application in meaningful contexts, feelings of success and pride reinforced the continuation of a culture for learning which is enjoyed in Cuba to this day.

In the eighties, the motivational whole language philosophy caught on like wildfire across the U.S. (Kim, 2008, p. 89)—not unlike the fever that embraced the Cuban literacy campaign's mission in many respects. One problem with this contagious fervor, however, was that the foundational skills for reading were often not sufficiently appreciated and integrated to the degree the NELP and NRP recommend under the "science of reading," nor to the degree the Cuban Literacy Project employed with sincere respect and success. Despite continued confusion in the states about how best to teach reading in an opaque alphabetic language such as English (Meier, 2007), teachers in America might do well to more sincerely research and embrace a truly balanced reading approach (Hemsfeld, 1989)—not the illusion of one as Moats warns (2007)—but one that includes engaging hands-on phonics activities such as word building along with manageable leveled books and opportunities for personally relevant writing that can offer sufficient application and practice to build fluency during the critical foundational period of the emergent holistic literacy journey (Pressley & Allington, 2014). While Cuba and America still seem worlds apart and there is yet no authentic way to compare literacy levels through the grades in either country nor even define the

optimal degree with which phonics should be integrated in differing alphabetic systems, there is still something to be gained in the states by recognizing the power of motivational ownership and basic skill development and practice that Cuba enjoyed while moving their country forward to achieving 100% literacy.

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