

## **An Anti-Racist Critical Reading of Global Literacy Campaigns: A Problematic Justice**

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### **Abstract**

Literacy does not automatically equate to freedom. In fact, when viewed historically, literacy campaigns have been used to create hegemony. Using a case study approach, this presenter will describe the goals of the Nicaraguan campaign in relationship to Freire's philosophy. Next, the details of the teaching and learning process in relationship to critical pedagogy will be analyzed. This paper seeks to strike a delicate balance between honoring the great work of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign – and other literacy campaigns around the world – while maintaining a realistic view of what was accomplished and why.

Justice and literacy are interconnected because access to particular literacies allow for certain levels of freedom. As Love (2020) reminds us, freedom is a practice, rather than a possession or a state of being so that “to want freedom is to welcome struggle” (p. 9). Moreover, according to Freire (2000), the struggle against oppression is both legitimate and ethical. The idea that literacy automatically generates freedom is one of the common myths about literacy.

In fact, throughout history, literacy campaigns have often been designed and implemented to create hegemony and oppression. For example, there were church-led campaigns in seventeenth-century Sweden and sixteenth-century Scotland that used religious texts such as the psalter (hymn book) and printed directories (readers) of family worship as primers respectively; the objective was to inculcate the people into a national religious and moral community. In sixteenth-century Germany, “both Catholic and Protestant states acutely feared religious heterodoxy within their borders” and “established schools designed to indoctrinate the general population and thereby ensure religious conformity” (Gawthrop, 2008, pp.32-33). Additionally, in Sweden the campaign leaders purposefully did not teach writing in their early Church campaign because they did not want people to produce their own thinking. And during the Cultural Revolution in China, the government desired that its people be literate but not intellectual; in fact, they attacked and even killed many teachers and academics. Consequently, in many historical instances, literacy was not liberatory in the way critical pedagogues might have hoped it would be. Like education, literacy can be a double-edged sword, used to liberate or oppress. For example, it has been highly problematic when literacy campaign leaders used one language for a literacy campaign, often the colonizer's language, which dismantled indigenous cultures and linguistic traditions.

In the case of the Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización (CNA) or the National Literacy Crusade in Nicaragua in 1980, the fight against illiteracy, which depended on thousands of teachers and young people, provides an opportunity to learn about the teaching accomplishments, obstacles, and resilience of the literacy volunteers, known as *brigadistas*. It was a literacy campaign that was designed with the intention to raise up the marginalized (*campesinos* – or farmers, workers, and women) in order to recognize and address their positionality of class, race, and gender, providing a space for their voices in Nicaragua. Therefore, one must explore what and how they were learning, in other words the pedagogy and its consequences. The accounts of the brigadistas

## Forum on Public Policy

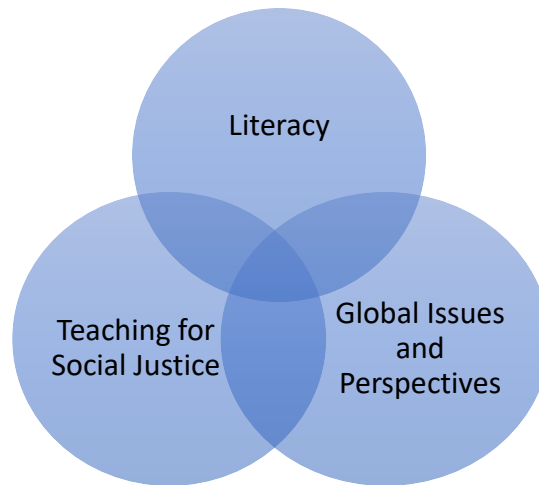
and campesinos provided many stories at the intersection of race, class, and gender. In fact, by centering the role of race, class, and gender in the campaign, the participants' accounts can demonstrate their identities as subjects and generators of thought.

In 1979, Jesuit priest, Fr. Fernando Cardenal, who dedicated his life to serving the poor, was appointed as director of the CNA. He described the link between illiteracy and social and political oppression as a fundamental problem of power and poverty. "The challenge to overcome illiteracy often becomes part of the larger challenge to overcome inequity and to create more egalitarian social structures through which the poorer members of a society can participate in the exercise of both economic power and political decision making" (Miller, 1985 p. 4). Consequently, there are significant justice issues with regard to who has access to literacy and how it is taught. This is important because teaching is an ethical enterprise, and, as teachers at all levels, we must "know and care about aspects of our shared life - our calling is to shepherd and enable the callings of others. Teachers, then, invite students to become somehow more capable, more thoughtful and powerful in their choices, more engaged in a culture and a civilization" (Ayers, 2004, p. 4). Oakes and Lipton (2003) provide an educational social justice framework with the following three objectives:

- To uncover, examine, and critique the values and politics that undergird educational decisions and practices as we also explore the more instrumental issues of organizing curriculum and instruction
- To challenge educational common sense and to ask important questions about why we do the things we do in schools and who benefits from them
- To attend to the ways in which schooling often contributes to the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of inequalities, particularly along the lines of race, class, gender, language, sexual orientation, and other such categories so we can construct more empowering alternatives

This framework is action-oriented, requires reflexivity, and encourages interrogation and analysis in the context, in this case, of literacy campaigns. Social justice is concerned with questions of power and decision-making as well as both economic and cultural resources available to individuals and to particular communities or sectors of those communities. In fact, "social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live" (Bell, 1997, pp. 1-2). I am particularly concerned with justice issues and how they were or were not addressed via critical pedagogies during the case study of the CNA, which is at the center of literacy, teaching for social justice, and a global lens (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overlapping Lenses



In order to problematize literacy campaigns in general, I will primarily use, as a case study, the Nicaraguan Literacy Campaign. Connection between illiteracy and social and political oppression concerns power and poverty. I hope to address justice issues and how they were/were not taken up via critical pedagogies during the campaign. This paper will use a critical antiracist lens to analyze the role critical pedagogy played in the event. Moreover, I will include examples from other national campaigns throughout history as well.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section will explicate the three theoretical lenses of Feminist Standpoint Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Anti-Racism. These perspectives can be used to analyze the CNA in order to better understand and learn from the literacy campaign, drawing strengths from each. All of this is done with a focus on justice.

#### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

While it is becoming more fluid, gender remains inherent in the structures of language because it is constructed as dichotomous categories hierarchically arranged *in relation to* one another. Everything in Spanish, the primary language in which the literacy campaign was designed and implemented, is either male or female (although this has changed in certain contexts with the use of *x*). The Spanish language itself is charged with power. So, too, are the sociocultural norms, which can be problematic in everyday events and in the interpretation of those events. “Much postmodern thought, like liberal humanism and patriarchy, can tolerate the existence of social and cultural multiplicity without challenging the material bases of inequality” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 110). The material basis of inequality reflects institutionalized power.

A feminist standpoint theory is one way of connecting feminist knowledge and women’s experiences to the realities of gendered social relations (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Its political basis was foundational to the women’s movement in that it undermines social sciences’ embedding of white male standpoint as hidden subject and agent (Smith, 2000). Standpoint theory starts with the lives of the marginalized when forming research questions and argues that knowledge must be socially situated (Harding, 1993). Marginalized groups are socially situated

in ways that provide the ability to increase their awareness and ask questions better than (or different from) the non-marginalized. This gendered lens of the division of labor applies at the intersection of race as well.

### Critical Pedagogy

First, according to Freire (2000), the struggle against oppression is evident in learning contexts by ways *the pedagogical*, or the localized didactic encounter between teacher and student, is implicated in *the political*, which is the social relations of production within the global capitalist economy. Critical theory in education assumes and requires that the pedagogical be political and vice versa. Consequently, critical theorists routinely question unequal relations between individuals and groups of people and act to offset them (Kanpol, 1994). Examining power creates a tension with regard to the purpose and role of education. For example, Freire's (2000) notion of praxis, which involves a cycle of reflection and action upon the world to transform it, was central to Nicaragua's literacy campaign.

Education is never politically neutral because teaching is a political act, contextualized in the social, cultural, and historical circumstances of the time. The purpose of engaging in critical pedagogy is to liberate rather than oppress. Teaching and learning are a collaborative endeavor where educators guide students to generate their own vocabulary which centers on current justice issues they are experiencing in order to change them. It is problem-posing and ultimately transformative.

### Anti-Racist Lens

While literacy involves cognitive processes, it is also embedded in social practices, which is important to schooling because "the field of education is anchored in White rage, especially public education" (Love, 2020, p. 21). Literacy events, including reading and writing, do not occur in isolation or outside of larger contexts. In education, campaigns included, literacies are linked to inequities, involving race, gender, immigration, varied abilities, and economic equality. Curricular tools of whiteness "use a variety of strategies to socialize students to internalize existing racist ideologies, ensuring that racial hierarchies are maintained through the education system" (Picower, 2021, p. 26). These tools include exclusively-White curricula, dodging blame, minimizing injustices, conflating equal with equitable, dependence on viewing the world through the White gaze, embedded stereotypes of racial differences and deficiencies, and racist policies and procedures.

Literacy campaigns depend on standardizing content, pedagogy, and texts, which can be problematic. Standardization, by its very essence, is "antithetical to diversity" primarily because it suggests that students live, learn, and operate in homogeneous environments, with equal opportunities afforded to them, and resources evenly distributed across the board (Milner, 2010).

Schooling as business-as-usual can be disrupted by interrogating the fiction of whiteness as a way to help readers of all races "think critically about how race functions systemically and often subconsciously to privilege people with certain perceived skin traits" (Beech, 2020, p.3). We must choose to do the work to be anti-racist and cannot remain quiet or neutral in light of current educational practices. We can re-evaluate what we do and why we do it, using our power to transform the oppressive, harmful structures.

### Methods

Using historical textual analysis, I read and analyzed a variety of records, documents, and artifacts from the time of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, such as primary sources, including news articles, manuals, handbooks, and journals (Aldaraca et. al, 1980; Asman, 1981; Cortazar,

1989; Ejercito Populares, 1980). “In contemporary society, all kinds of entities leave a trail of paper and artifacts, a kind of spoor that can be mined as part of fieldwork” (Patton, 2002). The national literacy campaign in Nicaragua was no exception. Challenges, however, often arise such as getting access to primary sources, understanding how and why a document was produced, and linking a document with other data sources. Additionally, I studied a number of secondary sources (Cardenal, 2015; D’Escoto, 1989; Hirshon & Butler, 1984; Miller, 1985; Musset, 2005; Walker, 1981; Weber, 1982). The secondary sources, which included a variety of genres such as essays, poems, books, and memoirs helped to know the details of the campaign while providing a deeper sociocultural and historical context of Nicaragua in 1980.

I also examined texts describing and analyzing the Cuban literacy campaign because it was a model for the CNA, incorporating similar organization structures and pedagogical processes (Abendroth, 2009; Keeble, 2001; Kozol, 1978; Murphy, 2012). Additionally, Cuban teachers worked as brigadistas in Nicaragua during the campaign; their expertise was invaluable during the planning and implementation.

More specifically, using seven components of Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019), I conducted a critical pedagogical analysis of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign. The purpose of this analysis was to examine whether or not the Nicaraguan literacy campaign adhered to the tenets of critical pedagogy since it is often referred to as a Freirean campaign and, like many campaigns, includes an aim of being liberatory. This type of analysis, however, could be done with any literacy campaign. The seven components, which will be defined and expanded upon in the next section, included the following:

- Praxis (Action/Reflection)
- Generative Themes
- Easter Experience
- Dialogue
- Conscientization
- Codification
- Banking Concept of Knowledge

Taking into account the material reality of the time and starting with the lives of the marginalized, I analyzed the Nicaraguan literacy campaign for whether it provided evidence of each of the seven components of critical pedagogy or whether each component was missing or problematic. I created and utilized a graphic organizer (see Appendix A). In the next section, I provide the complexities of such a campaign with regard to whether it engages in or practices a critical pedagogy, remaining attentive to the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. This type of analysis is significant because it has implications with regard to whether it was liberatory or oppressive.

## **Results**

In many ways, national literacy campaigns and the work they accomplished have had much to celebrate. For example, literacy drives of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Germany accounted for the uncommonly high literacy rates in the nineteenth century (Gawthrop, 2008). Early literacy campaigns in Sweden were the basis for many modern school reforms (Johansson,

2008). Literacy campaigns in India have led to many innovative solutions in educational organization and instruction (Bhola, 2008).

In the case of the CNA, the campaign was so effective, it decreased the illiteracy rate in Nicaragua from 50.4 percent to 12.9 percent in only five months with the participation of over 200,000 people volunteering across the country. While reflecting on Freire's work, Cardenal (2015) stated, "Raising awareness leads peasants and workers to organization and political action, to build a world where the interests of the majority are taken into account" (p. 137). His goal was clearly liberatory. However, the overall goals of the campaign were often obstacles to critical pedagogy. The directors of the campaign may have been too limited in time, personnel, and economic resources to implement a truly Freirean campaign because they only had six months to plan it, five months to implement it, needed to recruit hundreds of thousands of volunteers, and were mostly dependent on foreign aid. Freirean pedagogy used during the campaign, which typically would include problem-posing strategies, a dialogic process, fostering of solidarity, and a focus on reflection and action on the world, was often not utilized or under-utilized according to the tenets of critical pedagogy. This section addresses seven of those components.

### **Praxis (Action/Reflection)**

Praxis is action and reflection acting together upon their environment so that one can critically reflect on a lived reality in order to transform it, using the action-reflection cycle (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). The CNA demonstrated praxis with regard to the leadership of the campaign; they held regular meetings with the brigadistas, and the brigadistas held weekly meetings when possible to discuss their teaching challenges and successes. Information gathered during the meetings was used to implement changes. For example, Saturday workshops, which ran during the campaign in a central location in the field, were a place "to incorporate the individual volunteer into a group so that collectively, problems could be identified, discussed and resolved" (Miller, 1985, p. 152). Teaching methods and other teaching challenges were analyzed as a group, and the supervising teachers could provide added assistance.

However, the analysis of praxis becomes problematic when we ask whether the learners, the campesinos, the workers, and others being made literate, were engaged in praxis. The learning could be defined as the action, but the reflection and the cyclical structure was often not evident in the primer or pedagogy. The primer moved in one direction with regard to the phonics skills being taught; it was not recursive. Students mastered skill and then moved on. With regard to the content, lesson one begins with a photo of a political hero, Sandino, and the phrase "Sandino: guide of the revolution." Lesson seven addresses workers' rights, lesson ten agrarian reform, lesson 19 the exploitation of women, and lesson 20 the integration of the isolated coastal communities. Perhaps the content was meant to help the campesinos and workers to develop a growing sense of what the revolution could accomplish, but the order is confusing at best. This may be due to the fact that in shaping the scope and intensity of the war on illiteracy, "the political will of national leaders to effect dramatic changes in personal beliefs, individual and group behaviors, and major institutions emerge as the key factor" (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 5).

Furthermore, the purpose of praxis was to act on the environment. Language and the environment are linked. The campaign attempted to attend to “the vital connections between linguistic diversity and biodiversity. The different indigenous ways of knowing, which are adapted in ways that take account of the characteristics of the local bioregions, are also the basis of mutual aid and intergenerational knowledge that contributes to self-sufficiency” (Bowers, 2005, p. 15). However, this attempt to include the coastal populations may have been deficient. For example, though generally taught in Spanish, the language of the colonizer in Nicaragua, the materials and lessons were also taught in Sumo, Miskito, and Creole English in the coastal regions. However, while the campaign was multilingual, the content remained the same. This is problematic because “the language of instruction leads to the question of whose language and values form the medium and content of the literacy campaign” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, p. 19). As previously mentioned, Spanish is laden with gender differences, which inculcates the person being made literate with the inherent values. Moreover, the content of the language instruction was not attending to the aforementioned indigenous intergenerational ways of knowing.

Lastly, critical reflection is simply one way of knowing. There are many ways of knowing the world and creating knowledge. Social constructivism suggests that people create knowledge together when interacting with and in relation to others. Consequently, “critical reflection, although appropriate in certain contexts, is only one of many valid approaches to knowledge” (Bowers, 2005, p. 16). This may be crucially important when working cross-culturally. In other words, “in arguing that critical reflection is the *only* means of acquiring empowering knowledge, they turn a mode of knowing that is highly useful (indeed, indispensable) in certain contexts into a source of disempowerment – and even cultural domination” (Bowers, 2005, p. 17). Critical pedagogy is highly dependent on critical reflection – under the guise of praxis, and THE way of knowing.

### **Generative Themes**

Generative themes were concrete representations of an epoch’s “complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards their fulfillment” (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). Examining the primer used during the CNA, the themes provided by the leadership were related to revolutions and nation-building, such as imperialism, liberation, exploitation, and unity.

It is problematic that the campesinos and workers were not involved in generating themes, but rather were taught through those themes determined by the leadership. More immediate concerns such as death, poverty, farming, starvation, family, and disease may have been themes generated by the campesinos. Not allowing theme generation during the lessons was due to the time constraints of the planning stage. Additionally, “the Nicaraguan approach took as given the viability and legitimacy of the government’s programs for reordering the society to benefit the poor” (Miller, 1985, p. 87). The power relationships were changing drastically.

Moreover, the brigadistas were typically trained in a two-week workshop. Consequently, the teaching process was challenging once they began their work with the learners. The teaching process utilized a primarily top-down approach rather than a true dialectical interaction. The primer, which included the content to be taught, was determined before meeting the learners and

was used with people all over the country, regardless of their specific ideas, hopes, values, and doubts. “Historically, there has been constant tension between the use of literacy for achieving individual versus collective goals” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 7).

### **Easter Experience**

“Historically, the initiation of a literacy campaign has been associated with major transformations in social structures and belief systems [and] usually there is a profound, if not cataclysmic, triggering event” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 4). Those major transformations are indicative of what occurs on an individual level as well. An Easter Experience describes a radical conversion that occurs from continual re-examination of oneself, so that one becomes a new person through a profound rebirth. In the state propaganda, through the primer, the recruitment posters, and radio programs, the new leaders were promising the creation of a new man [person] (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). In fact, the primer was titled, *The Dawn of the People*, as if they were just now beginning to live. In some ways, the female brigadistas, having attained a new way of being through new freedoms and increased responsibilities to the country, did, in fact, have a rebirth. Many spoke afterward about not being able to return to how things used to be.

For example, 17-year-old Claudia wrote the following:

I had certain clashes with my family after I returned from the CNA, they wanted to treat me like a girl or an object. In the crusade the women, at least we felt freer, all working, helping in everything, and without our parents, subsisting for five month alone and that gives you the experience to know how to take care of yourself (Assman, 1981, p. 95).

The Easter Experience is an example of profound change, in this case, following the overthrow of a forty-year dictatorship.

The important question, however, is what changed for the newly literate people? “The transformations that provide the context for most mass literacy campaigns usually embrace the formation of a new type of person in a qualitatively different society” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 5). Nicaragua, the new Sandinista leaders claimed, was working to shift from a dictatorship to a democracy.

### **Dialogue**

Freire’s notion of dialogue is based in trust, mutual respect, care and commitment. With regard to power, dialogue presupposes an equality among its participants (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). Through questioning prior knowledge, the participants can change what they know and create or produce new knowledge. Through dialogue and living together, brigadistas became equal members of the family, doing chores, being cared for by their “parents,” and they often cried when it was time to leave at the end of the campaign. Clearly, trust, mutual respect, and care were developed among the families being alphabetized and the brigadistas.

There was dialogue among the leadership, which included a variety of stakeholders such as business leaders, political organizations, church leaders, and educators. They consulted with external collaborators as well as from Cuba, Germany, and the United States.



Were the younger brigadistas seen as “equal” to those who were learning, especially the adults? Many of the brigadistas were from middle or upper-class families, well-educated, and were traveling to the rural areas with the understanding that they were helping the disenfranchised. “Freire’s construction of mediators expresses a corruption of his awareness of oppression. His ‘conscience’ operates as a veil, hiding from ‘liberated’ agents of change their own oppression, the fact that their conscience is still embedded in an oppressive system and thus becomes counterproductive” (Esteva et al., 2005, p. 20). The mediators, in this case the brigadistas, may have been unaware of their own oppression.

Levels of commitment varied among the brigadistas. Some brigadistas ran away when they got homesick, but some risked and even sacrificed their lives. In fact, being a brigadista was dangerous; “59 brigadistas died in accidents or were victims of counter-revolutionary forces” (Hanemann, 2005, p. 9). Conversely, some of the campesinos resisted or outright refused to learn to read. In fact, some men prohibited the women in the family to learn to read and some women initially resisted due to childcare or a fear of out-performing the men. Consequently, all liberation may not look the same. Perhaps it is the one learning who gets to define liberation – or whether s/he is oppressed in the first place.

### **Conscientization**

In analyzing past literacy campaigns, Arnove and Graff (2008) found that “literacy is almost never itself an isolated or absolute goal. It is rather one part of a larger process and a vehicle for that process. Literacy is invested with a special significance, but seldom in and of itself” (p. 7). Perhaps certain types of literacies are integral to conscientization. Conscientization can be defined as a process wherein one develops a critical awareness of social reality by reflecting and acting. The move to act is fundamental because the goal is to change reality, to transform it for the better. Conscientization is a learning process that uncovers social myths, revealing real problems and concrete needs (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019).

The campaign was based on the major action of a recent revolution, and perhaps the CNA was meant to develop a new, critical awareness for its participants. During the learning process, learners were pushed to learn at a particular pace with one goal in mind: reading and writing. There was a clear pacing to the lessons because due mostly to economic reasons, the duration of the campaign was five months.

For example, a brigadista from the city, Josefina Vijil, demonstrated her development of a critical awareness in writing the following in a letter to a family member:

Now my words come from the experience of the mountains, from the thatched roofs of my people, who can only eat rice, beans, and tortillas. Today I speak covered with insect bites, from under a leaky roof that wets the cot where I sleep, and I am happy because for the first time I can truly identify with my people and I feel more Nicaraguan than ever” (Cardenal, 2015, p.165).

Her identity was transformed; she saw herself in relation to the rural Nicaraguans in a way she had not before. This was due to the fact that she had the opportunity to share their social practices and concrete reality during the campaign. Fr. Cardenal described another brigadista who was profoundly sensitive and had been deeply touched by his experience working with the campesinos in the literacy campaign, developing strong ties to the family where he was sent to teach. He wrote, “The campaign meant so much to me. It was my first step, and once you take that first step, as one of the heroes said, you never stop walking” (Cardenal, 2015, p. 192).

Another important step was in improving the health of the communities. The campaign also taught hygiene such as how to limit the spreading of diseases by washing with soap, eradicating vermin, and building outhouses away from the homes, health education. “Then as now, reformers and idealists... have viewed literacy as a means to other ends – whether a more moral society or a more stable political order” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, p. 2). Improved health outcomes were related to both a more moral society and a more stable political order. This necessitates an understanding of real problems and concrete needs.

Historically, proposed outcomes of literacy campaigns included “Changes in self-concepts, ideological orientations, political dispositions, feelings of efficacy, and commitments to engage in social action” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, p. 22). As a basis of reflection when developing a critical awareness, “Campaigns... have used a variety of media and specially developed materials, commonly involving a special cosmology of symbols, martyrs, and heroes. They have often been initiated and sustained by charismatic leaders and usually depend on a special “strike force” of teachers to disseminate a particular faith or world view” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, p. 2). This was a concern by some campesinos who feared the brigadistas were there to spread socialism. The class differences between the campesinos and the brigadistas and the non-traditional gender roles of the female brigadistas often exacerbated the fear of the campesinos.

Moreover, it is more difficult to engage in conscientization when texts are being used for the purpose of disseminating a particular faith or world view as was the case in the CNA and other national literacy campaigns. “Emotionally charged words and generative themes characterize the literacy primers in societies that are undergoing radical change” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, p. 15). This may be more problematic with regard to the coastal indigenous communities because, as previously mentioned, education is never politically neutral. In fact, “the idea of education is exclusively modern. Born with capitalism, education perpetuates it. The past is colonized every time the cultural practices or traditions for learning, study, or initiations into traditions of nonmodern peoples are reduced to that category ‘education’” (Esteva et al., 2005, p. 23).

### **Codification**

Codification involves gathering information to build a picture that reflects real people and situations. Therefore, decodification is a process where participants identify with aspects of a situation with the purpose of critical reflection in order to better understand something (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). Specific to the instructional method was that each lesson began with a photo which was “unpacked” or decoded, a process facilitated by the brigadista. For example, lesson two began with a photo of Carlos Fonseca, one of the leaders of the revolution. It was very possible that a campesino had heard of Carlos Fonseca but had never seen him.

CNA leadership had one worldview, and the campesinos had another. For example, race, social class, and gender played an important role in the planning, teaching, and learning during the literacy campaign. Illiteracy was typically higher for women than men, and the illiteracy rates were much higher in the impoverished rural areas. However, the men often forbade their wives to participate. Brigadistas frequently reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, such as the campesinos', expectations that the female brigadistas take on domestic roles while the male brigadistas were to help in the fields and other locations outside the home. Although female brigadistas were given leadership roles - sometimes over young, male brigades - this created issues of power. Challenging traditional gender norms, female brigadistas made up more than 50 percent of the volunteers. Female brigadistas faced additional pressures of male hostility and sexual assault, whether it be by campesinos, male brigadistas, or those working/fighting against the Sandinistas. Issues of power with regard to gender were rarely addressed or discussed in the texts describing and celebrating the CNA.

### **Banking Concept of Knowledge**

The banking concept of knowledge is the idea that the knowledge is bestowed on the illiterate person, or deposited into the empty bank account of the mind (Paulo Freire Institute, 2019). In many ways, the literacy campaign had a top-down approach. In fact, after consulting on the teaching methods designed by the CNA leadership, Freire's "principal criticism concerned the fact that at that time, no step allowed the learners to create their own words or sentences" (Miller, 1985, p. 91). Personal word creation was invaluable to any literacy program that claimed to be liberatory. "Historically large-scale efforts to provide literacy have not been tied to the level of wealth, industrialization, urbanization, or democratization of a society, nor to a particular type of political regime. Instead, they have been more closely related to efforts of centralizing authorities to establish a moral or political consensus, and over the past two hundred years, to nation-state building" (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p.2). Establishing a moral and political consensus was definitely a goal of the Sandinistas since once the bond of suffering under and fighting against the dictatorship was gone, they needed other ways to work together.

On the other hand, the brigadistas learned much from the families with which they lived and who they alphabetized. For example, the brigadistas, who were often from the cities, learned to take care of farm animals, milk goats, ride horses, plant seeds, and harvest crops. Building on the idea of the banking concept is "...the social prejudice that holds that education via schooling and its equivalents is the only legitimate way to prepare people to live, and that whatever is learned outside of them has no value" (Esteva et al., 2005, p. 24). Reading and writing were valued by the dominant culture in Nicaragua, but some of the campesinos thought them unnecessary.

### **Significance**

Language and literacy play a role in what can and should be taught and learned during a campaign. Fairclough (1995) speaks of "an enhanced role for language in the exercise of power: It is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values, and identities are taught and learnt" (p. 219). This highlights the importance of

## Forum on Public Policy

the dialogic process proposed by Freire as well as the need to interrogate and challenge the construction of the teaching (brigadista) training and process during the campaign. Hooks (1994) asserts that the classroom is the most radical space of possibility in the academy because in it one can think, rethink, and create new visions. This may also hold true in a small hut in the countryside of Nicaragua. Moreover, radical spaces of possibility can threaten the status quo. For example, “Pencils had very real meaning as weapons of war in Nicaragua: counter-revolutionaries who attacked literacy workers as agents of transformation occurring in the country actually drove pencils through the cheeks of some of the ‘brigadistas’ whom they had killed” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 15). Literacy was a life or death endeavor. This section explores the significance of differentiating between functional and critical literacy as well as a response to recent critiques of critical pedagogy.

Arnové and Graff (2008) suggest that “literacy may also be viewed along a continuum: a set of skills that may become more complex over time in response to changing social contexts, shifting demands on individuals’ communication skills, or individuals’ own efforts at advancement” (p. 21). However, one may not expect deep levels of literacy to be achieved, especially in a short-term literacy campaign.

In the larger picture, basic literacy is quite obviously related to who has access to power. As previously mentioned, the connection between illiteracy and social and political oppression is a fundamental problem of power and poverty. Basic literacy, what we call functional literacy, is often viewed through an economic lens. Those who are literate will get better jobs and be better workers. And, perhaps, functional literacy was the goal of the Nicaraguan campaign, as it was for many other national literacy campaigns.

Using a sociocultural perspective, one moves beyond a simple functional literacy (where literacy is just a set of skills) to view literacy as ways of being in the world. That provides a foundation for critical literacy, which, according to Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008), includes first taking a critical stance through the attitudes and dispositions we take on that enable us to become critically literate beings with four dimensions (consciously engaging, entertaining alternate ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, and being reflexive); and engaging in critical social practices such as disrupting the common place, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Literacy becomes broader, collaborative, negotiated, malleable, dynamic, and power-laden. Consequently, developing students’ critical literacy by engaging in critical pedagogy can provide a basis for transformative action, creating concrete social change.

However, using a critical pedagogical analysis may be problematic for some readers because Freire and critical pedagogy have their critics. Some believe that literacy is always colonizing. According to Bowers (2005), “by ignoring a significant body of scholarly writings on the differences between orality and literacy, Freirean thinkers failed to understand that literacy itself is a colonizing process that reinforces a modern sense of individualism, privileges sight over the other senses, and fosters abstract thinking that is integral to critical reflection” (p. 15). The values inherent in critical pedagogy, claim his critics, reflect Western values. “Freire never questioned his central presupposition that education is a universal good, part and parcel of the human condition” and “he ignored the plain fact that for the oppressed, the social majorities of the world, education has become one of the most humiliating and disabling components of their

## Forum on Public Policy

oppression, perhaps even the very worst” (Esteva et al., 2005, p. 23). This certainly was proven in the re-education schools for Native Americans in the United States from the 1870s to the mid 1900s, for example. Nevertheless, it may now be erroneous to compare institutionalized schooling with short-term literacy campaigns. “In the last thirty years, there has been a change in ideology of literacy toward an emphasis on empowerment” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 27).

I do not believe that literacy – or even education in the abstract – is *always* colonizing. I purport that it can be a colonizing process, but not automatically so. For example, it is not inevitable that print literacy destroys the oral traditions of indigenous peoples. According to Gawthrop (2008), “literacy and oral tradition have coexisted throughout nearly all of history in a variety of cultural configuration” (p. 30). Throughout the literacy campaign in Nicaragua and those throughout the globe, literacy was viewed as positive growth and development with the goal of creating a nation.

I argue that teaching literacy skills is not a question of conquest versus isolation, but that there is a third option. Communities can choose to collaborate, working in solidarity. Conquest is different from collaboration, which involves power-sharing. Freire taught from collaboration, not conquest, which is why praxis, dialogue, and generative themes were key to his pedagogy. People often, though not always, have the choice to learn/accept help. For example, the campesinos had the option to learn to read and write. It was a choice to become literate. Perhaps there are benefits and limitations to becoming literate, but I do not believe that becoming literate is always colonizing. “The poverty of peasants was compounded by the fact that they were illiterate. Illiteracy made them even more marginalized and excluded” (Cardenal, 2015, p. 129). Becoming literate would provide inclusion and give them access to the center. Critical pedagogy offers a way to view literacy as liberating or oppressing, and it offers a tension between the two views.

### Conclusion

This paper sought to strike a delicate balance between honoring the great work of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign – and other literacy campaigns around the world – while maintaining a realistic view of what was accomplished and why. The goal of analyzing the campaign is to use the lives of the marginalized as a starting point because knowledge must be socially situated. Major campaigns carry risks like raising unrealistic expectations. They do not always, perhaps may be unable to, adequately address race, class, and gender, using a centrally designed ‘one size fits all’ approach with a prescribed curriculum, objectives, and materials. But literacy campaigns have reaped many rewards as well. Campaigns have offered some groups an access to literacy that had often been denied to them in an attempt to oppress and control them, often by their own governments or simply by their geographic locations. “Historically and comparatively, rural populations, the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, and women have been the last to receive literacy instruction and to gain access to advanced levels of schooling” (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 19). Even in so doing, race, class, and gender still play a significant role in the campaign. As educational researchers, we can analyze an historical educational event so that the sociocultural implications are understood and become useful knowledge for further educational endeavors.

## Forum on Public Policy

As previously mentioned, the overall goals of the campaign were often obstacles to critical pedagogy. The directors of the campaign may have been too limited in time, personnel, and economic resources to implement a truly Freirean-inspired campaign. Regardless, there were many success during the campaign that educators can learn from them moving forward. For example, results from the CNA showed that due to the hard work of thousands of volunteers, 406,056 people were made literate (Chacón & Pozas, 1980). At the same time, when using a critical pedagogical lens, there was much about the campaign that could be interrupted as problematic. There will be similar results with other literacy campaigns around the globe. Luckily, it doesn't end with studying the historicity of literacy campaigns. "There also are international dimensions to the types of literacy activities characterizing the second half of the twentieth century, and increasing opportunities for countries to learn from one another" (Arnové & Graff, 2008, p. 3). We can share across countries and cultures to improve the functionality of literacy campaigns and initiatives around the globe.

Freire "assumed that the oppressed cannot liberate themselves by themselves" (Esteva et al., 2005, p. 20). I do not know if that is true, but I do believe that all people can use allies and co-conspirators. In his educational process, Freire tried to generate words based on the knowledge of the people. His use of dialogue presupposes equality among the participants, and the goal of critical pedagogy was to problem-solve so that lives - and thusly the world - could be transformed. That is what Cardenal (2015) saw in the successes of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign: "I have seen the energy and profound internal force of human beings building a new society by giving of themselves in love and in solidarity" (Cardenal, 2015, 247). Perhaps Freire's process did not or cannot work in every context to the extent that critical pedagogues imagined since many social and political motivations and goals were often not in the control of the teacher, but, still, it gives me hope.

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## Forum on Public Policy

### Appendix A: Critical Pedagogical Analysis

#### **Critical Pedagogical Analysis of Literacy Campaign**

<b>Components</b>	Evidence: What Works	Problematic: What Doesn't
<p><b>Praxis (Action/Reflection)</b>            Must act together upon their environment in order to critically reflect upon their reality and transform it through further action and critical reflection.</p>		
<p><b>Generative Themes</b>            An epoch "is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards their fulfilment." The concrete representation constitutes the themes of the epoch.</p>		
<p><b>Easter Experience</b>            "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow for ambivalent behavior... Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were."</p>		
<p><b>Dialogue</b>            To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what s/he knows and realize that through dialogue existing thoughts will</p>		

## Forum on Public Policy

<p>change and new knowledge will be created.</p>		
<p><b>Conscientization</b>          The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. We acquire social myths, which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs.</p>		
<p><b>Codification</b>          A way of gathering information in order to build up a picture (codify) around real situations and real people. Decodification is a process whereby the people in a group begin to identify with aspects of the situation until they feel themselves to be in the situation and able to reflect critically upon its various aspects, gathering understanding. It is like a photographer bringing a picture into focus.</p>		
<p><b>Banking Concept of Knowledge</b>          The concept of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing." (Against this.)</p>		