

REVOLT AGAINST IGNORANCE

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By the end of June, 1979, the Sandinistas* knew that they had won the bitter struggle with the then oldest dictatorship in Latin America. After 43 years of family rule by the Somozas, the people of Nicaragua were about to get a change in government. Even though the battle for Managua was still raging, ministers were named and position papers drawn up to provide the outline of how the soon-to-be government would organize itself. One of these position papers came from the future Minister of Education, Carlos Tunnermann. It was a proposal for a national literacy campaign within the framework of the reconstruction process.

The need was great. Nicaragua had a very high illiteracy rate: 50 percent of the population over 10 years of age did not know how to read. As a reform government, the Sandinistas were concerned that they had to move fast and hard on the promises they had made to the people of Nicaragua about a revolutionary win meaning a better life for all, especially the poor. Along with political liberties and human rights, that meant increased services in health, housing, transportation, food and, of course, education.

Managua fell July 19, 1979, within days of the writing of the literacy proposal. Within a week, Father Fernando Cardenal, S.J. had been asked to head up the effort to teach the country to read and write. He accepted and again, within days, had recruited the small band of Nicaraguans who became the nucleus of the adult education leadership.

The basic structure of the literacy program was decided upon early in the autumn. There were departments of curriculum development, teacher training, research, administration, fund raising, design and graphics, statistics and census, press relations and "organization", which was the division in charge of teachers and implementation.

The official name of the literacy program was also decided upon early: "National Literacy Crusade in Honour of the Heroes and Martyrs of Nicaragua's Liberation." Indeed, many of the tactics and much of the strategy of the Crusade were taken from the 20-year revolutionary struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. Perhaps most



The literacy army on the move: an education in education.

important was the strategy of relying on the people themselves to win the "battle against ignorance," as it was called.

The local structure of the Crusade was set up so that representatives of local organizations were part of the decision-making process. Typically, that meant there would be a representative from the neighborhood, a women's organization, a labour union, the local business community, a farmworker, and the priest or a layperson representative from the local parish.

The literacy Crusade was given the number one priority of the new administration, and the whole population turned to the accomplishment of the educational task. Political theorists call it "popular participation", and the literacy Crusade is one of the most interesting examples of it in recent history. The reason Nicaragua did so much better than any of the other countries in Latin America who started literacy campaigns after 1979 (and many countries did, somewhat to counteract the image that literacy goes with revolution) is that the new government had the credibility to mobilize the country to do the job.

It became obvious that there was nothing very mysterious about the process of teaching the country to read. The main ingredient was the hard work of hundreds of thousands of people who volunteered their time, and an administration that subordinated all other priorities to basic education.

The non-paid community advisory group was equal in authority to the local staff of the Ministry of Education. Through this structure, the local peo-

ple had input into the planning and decision-making and were able to participate by carrying out specific tasks.

Back in Managua, in late 1979, the textbooks and teachers' guides were being prepared at a furious rate. The deadline was close. The only month in which the Crusade could start was March. Harvest season comes to a close then, but the rainy season has not yet started. Teaching had to be completed during the rainy season, because the rural people all work long and exhausting days during the harvest. Yet the Crusade also had to start before the rains got serious, because

Nicaragua is a poor country with few roads in the rural areas. Teachers typically walked five days to get to the place in which they were to teach. Doing that in the rain would not have been just unpleasant, but likely impossible because of rising rivers and paths that become impassable for the whole rainy season. The teachers had to get in before the rain started and stay until it ended.

Who were these teachers, willing to go to places where there were no doctors, nurses, electricity, running water or any other amenity except the friendship and support of the peasants themselves? They were high school and university students who had obtained permission from their parents to go on this dangerous and selfless mission. It was no small thing to decide to do. There was physical danger from the harsh conditions and from bands of counterrevolutionaries (defeated members of Somoza's army) that still wandered the countryside. The danger was not just hypothetical. Of the 60 000 *brigadistas* who taught in the countryside, 56 did not return. Some died from accidents, but seven were actually murdered by counterrevolutionaries in an effort to scare them away and stop the teaching effort.

The teachers were called *brigadistas* in keeping with the metaphor of a "war against ignorance": *Brigadista* literally means a member of a military brigade. The organization was set up that way partly because it was efficient and partly because it gave Nicaraguan young people a chance to be active participants in another "war of liberation."

In Nicaragua, the literacy Crusade not only taught people to read and write, but gave the *brigadistas* quite an education too. Part of it came from seeing and living in the poverty of the countryside. Overcoming that poverty was one of the main reasons the Sandinistas started the revolution in the first place, so it was important for the "future of the country" — the educated young people — to really understand it. The other part of the education of the *brigadistas* came from "ownership." They all fought and suffered in a war of liberation against ignorance; some of them even gave their lives. They "owned" the reform movement of the Sandinistas, because they suffered and worked as participants in it by teaching the country to read and write.

The young people who were headed for the countryside to teach literacy were carefully trained. They were organized into the EPA (*Ejercito Popular de Alfabetización*), the Popular Literacy Army. During January, February and early March of 1980 they did calisthenics, studied revolutionary politics, learned to march, and developed the "spirit" they would need to sustain them once they hit the harsh reality of the countryside.

For many, it was a return to the schools where they had been receiving their own education. These included private schools as well as public. The participation of youth in the literacy effort cut across class lines and religious lines (Protestant high schools and even seminaries, as well as Catholic and public schools co-operated with the literacy effort). It also cut across the lines of inherited sexism, as young women participated equally with the young men in the arduous and dangerous work in the countryside.

The basic unit was called a squadron, ideally made up of 30 student-teachers and three "conventional" teachers. The squadrons were all male or all female. This division was very important in developing female leadership. The female squadrons automatically drew out female leadership at the squadron level. Then at the regional level (for example, every three squadrons had a student-teacher supervisor in charge of all three units) a young woman could as easily be in charge as a man. For example, one frequently saw a 15-year-old woman taking charge of the regional supervision of 60 young men and 30 women, because that happened to be the ratio

**"Sandinista" is the name chosen by the Nicaraguan revolution to refer to itself. It comes from the last name of Augusto Cesar Sandino, the independence leader of Nicaragua in the 1920's and 1930's. Its use implies that the Nicaraguans wanted their revolution to be viewed as completely homegrown. The name existed for 20 years before the Sandinistas won the revolution. The main leader of the revolution was not Sandino (who was assassinated by Somoza's men in 1935), but Carlos Fonseca Amador (1936-1978), a brilliant student and political leader.*

of men and women literacy teachers in that area. The result was a quiet gain in confidence and stature on the part of the women (the previously unthinkable — young women giving orders to young men — was now becoming routine).

And what about the three "conventional" teachers who formed part of every teaching brigade? The government maintained the teachers on salary throughout the Crusade semester, during which all regular schools (except the graduate schools in medicine and agronomy) were closed. About half the teachers decided to remain home and work on curriculum development. But the other half swallowed a great deal of fear and trepidation to accompany the student-teachers and provide technical supervision in literacy teaching skills, and also the comfort of presence of someone older and more experienced for the five months of literacy teaching. The teachers who went shared all the hardships of the student-teachers, lived with the same families, ate the same food, dug the same latrines, scratched the same

mosquito bites and suffered the same frequent bouts of malaria.

In theory, political supervision came from the student leadership. Technical supervision — how to teach reading and writing — came from the school teachers. That produced a few ruffled feathers and some conflict, but usually the teacher and student-teacher leadership "rose to the occasion" by cooperating in both kinds of leadership.

The concept of "political supervision" might sound obscure or ominous. But in Nicaragua, it did not mean something like "checking on ideology", but rather reminding the students of why they were where they were, and what their sacrifices meant in terms of the common good and good for the peasants.

The training of the *brigadistas* for this kind of work was accompanied by the technical training of the teachers in literacy methodology. The methodology was eclectic, drawing from the work of Paulo Freire and others in the Latin American tradition of committed adult education. The most important single influence was the literacy work done by educators committed to social change in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua itself. The teachers were given this methodology training in intense week-long workshops. They in turn taught the high school and college students.

The frantic labour to have primers written and ready by March was successful: The deadline was met and the student-teachers, with their teachers, departed for the countryside on March 23, 1980.

Five months and much more labour later, the *brigadistas* started to return to the cities, in mid-August. A celebration in the main plaza in Managua ended the Crusade. The largest gathering in Nicaraguan history — 500 000 people, a quarter of the population of the entire country — heard the announcement that the illiteracy rate had been reduced from 50 percent to 12.96 percent and that Nicaragua was declared "victorious in its battle against illiteracy."

As the sun set and the speeches ended, the best bands of the country began to play. People celebrated what they had done to make Nicaragua a better place to live. The music and dancing lasted until dawn, the symbol of the new Nicaragua, and the title chosen for the literacy primer — *The daybreak of the people (Amamecer del Pueblo)*.

If daybreak was the literacy Crusade, the new morning of Nicaragua is a successful adult education program, which continues to the present with the same people who learned to read and write in 1980. □

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READING THE SIGNS

Literacy campaigns have become important tools of education and development. Most attempt to link learning reading and writing skills with building an awareness in people of their own potential to change and improve their lives.

Quickly writing new texts and teaching materials, running crash training programs for literacy workers, and pulling together an organizational network that extends into almost every home in a developing country commands almost the total attention of the country for the duration of a literacy campaign.

There is often little time or few resources remaining for an evaluation of results or examination of the process of mounting a literacy campaign. Yet the knowledge to be gained from such investigations could be extremely valuable for other countries, or in providing ways of making ongoing campaigns more effective.

IDRC is supporting research on literacy campaigns in three countries: In Ecuador, an evaluation of the processes and outcomes at the community and individual level; in Ethiopia, a similar examination of methods and effectiveness, together with an assessment of what educational activities should follow the campaign; and in Nicaragua, the preparation of definitive history of the campaign that will preserve a record of experience, development, and results.