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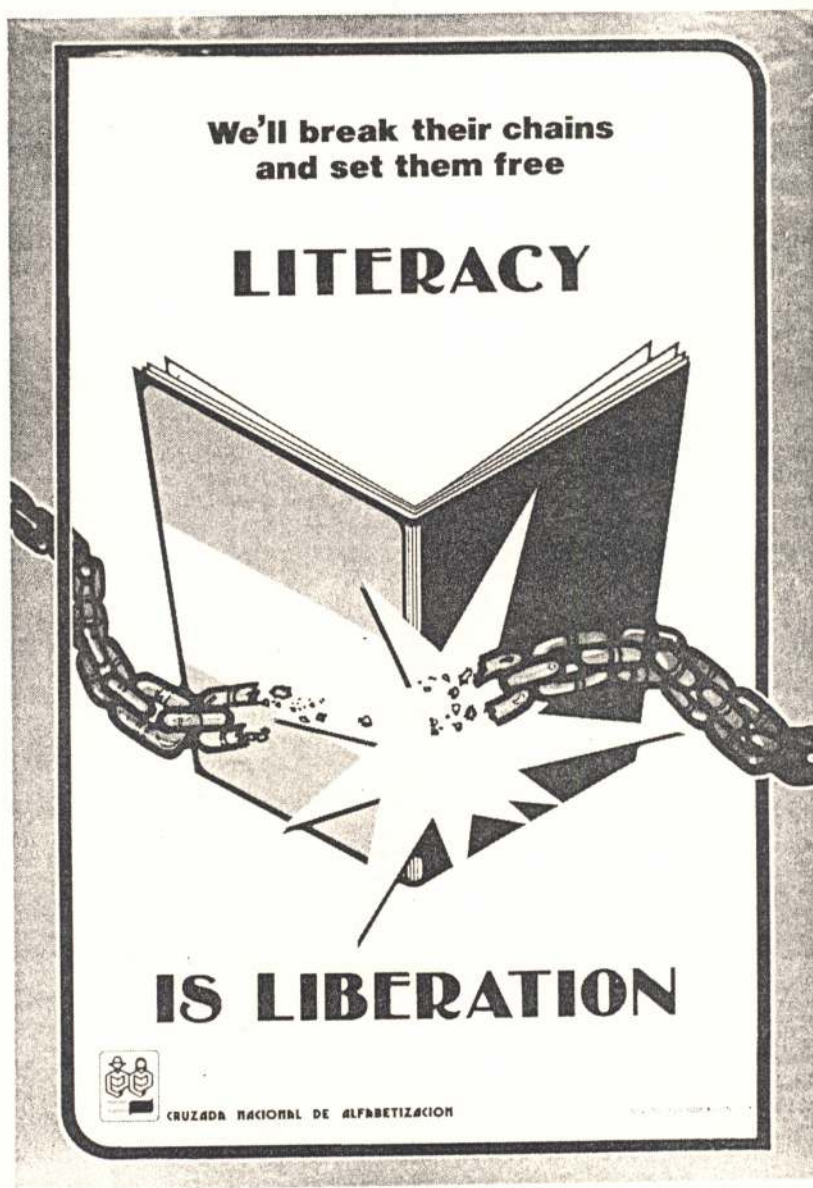
CHIHUOCHU LIVROS INFANTIS Hifase + 30 anos: Nicaragua

FCF-PTBF-07-0717

INTERRACIAL BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

BULLETIN

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 2, 1981 ISSN 0146-5562



Literacy Crusade in Nicaragua: A Report

The work of Paulo Freire, author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, was the basis of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade; here is an explanation of his methodology

About Freire

Two decades have passed since Paulo Freire perfected his 40-hour method for teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants. Despite his spectacular success, he was jailed and then exiled by the Brazilian government because learners were politicized as they became literate. Freire worked in Chile for five years before going on to Harvard; he is now special consultant in education to the World Council of Churches in Geneva. From that base he has directed the use of his method in literacy campaigns for adults in Latin America and Africa. Most recently, he has helped shape Nicaragua's 1980 literacy campaign and was involved in developing the *cartillas* or primers there (see page 10).

The following information about Freire's methodology is excerpted and adapted from "Conscientization: Paulo Freire's Alternative to Teaching" by the Institute of Cultural Action, Geneva, for the Methodist Missionary Society, London.

We often assume that if we teach people, they will "learn"; that if we explain the concepts of writing, they will be able to "read." We also assume that if poor and oppressed people are "taught" to "read," they will have taken the first major step towards throwing off their poverty and oppression.

In Latin America, despite a century of educational programs and despite many adult literacy campaigns, the vast numbers of ignorant and illiterate people are growing, and in most cases they are as oppressed as ever. And many who do learn to "read" remain oppressed as well. There must be a better way.

Professor Paulo Freire, the son of a Brazilian peasant, believes that there



Part of the Literacy Crusade was to teach basic mathematical skills.

is. Now widely respected for his theory of political education, his reputation is due to the success of a program for adult literacy tried out and perfected in the early 1960s among some poor Brazilian peasant communities.

As a teacher, Freire found that the inability of illiterate peasants to learn was related to their feelings of fatalism and helplessness. They saw themselves as powerless, as worthless objects. Their only real ambition, remote as it seemed, was to obtain the possessions which to them symbolized success and achievement.

Freire set about creating a process to help the peasants free themselves from this state of powerlessness. The result was his concept of "conscientization," which is somewhat similar to consciousness-raising as it is understood in the U.S.

Freire believed that the first step

was to create self-confidence. He felt that only then would people see their misery as the result of historical factors and the way society is organized—as something they could set about altering.

A basic principle of Freire's methodology is that people learn best as a group, from one another, without the formal "teacher-pupil" relationship. He has tried to create a situation in which people stop being passive objects crammed with information by their teacher. Instead they begin to look critically at their environment and the influence it has on them, and to make their own decisions.

Peasants gather in the presence of a coordinator who shows pictures of everyday scenes or objects for discussion. Every new discussion helps those taking part to stand back from their own situation until finally they see it more critically. For people who have always accepted that the factors affecting their lives are beyond their control, this is an important step forward. Drought, hunger, hard labor and debt to remote employers—all part of a way of life they have believed to be inevitable—now become problems to be studied and reflected upon.

This reflection is the "reading" of reality. And then, according to Freire, comes the will to "write" or create. The construction of a well yielding water where it is needed or the building of a wooden house are conscious acts through which the peasants discover their effectiveness. Having proved that they have the power to change nature, what is to prevent them from transforming other aspects of their life? One of Freire's basic tenets is that there is no neutral edu-

cation—only education to “domesticate” or liberate people. Education is either conditioning to accept the status quo or deconditioning to question and change it. For Freire, education is conscientization—a process of making people aware, through which they learn to “read” (i.e., understand) true reality and to “write” it, which means taking it into their own control. To interpret conscientization as merely a progressive literacy program for peasants is to completely miss the point. It is a totally new alternative to traditional education, where change and learning and experience take on simultaneous and equal roles.

The critical capacity of the pupils grows out of dialogue about meaningful situations in their lives, on which they have insights to contribute. Both teacher and pupils join in seeking truth about relevant problems, while respecting each other's opinions. The teacher serves as the coordinator of a discussion, while the pupils become participants in a group trying to understand existence in a changing society.

As a basis for the discussions, Freire isolates a minimal core vocabulary touching on life situations of the pupils. The crucial criteria is that words are chosen for their potential capacity to confront the social, cultural and political reality. The words should provide mental and emotional stimulation—that is, they should suggest and mean something important.

Carefully prepared pictures showing familiar scenes of life and work are often used as teaching aids. These pictures include objects of nature, such as a tree, and of culture, such as an ax. Thus, vocabulary is built on items that have meaning to the students. Flexibility of the teacher in following the ideas triggered by the pictures is essential.

Though Freire originally built a reading vocabulary from the Brazilian peasants' own language in each village, the Nicaraguans—in order to pre-package a program to be carried out nation-wide—predetermined the vocabulary for their literacy campaign based upon knowledge of their country and their own revolution.

For Freire, the ability to master a language in no way guarantees effective control of one's environment and life. “We are all illiterate!” Paulo Freire told his astonished students at Harvard years after leaving Brazil.

As far as he was concerned, his students—who were unable to see through the aims of those who manipulate the U.S. consumer society—had fundamentally no more control over the course of their lives than had Brazilian peasants.

Freire recalls an old peasant, illiterate in the conventional sense, who asked: “If God made the sun for all people and lets the rain fall, why should the earth, which God also created, belong only to the rich?” According to Freire, people with sufficient understanding to ask that type of question have the potential to control the course of their own lives.

Even Freire's severest critics, such as Peter L. Berger of Rutgers University who questions Freire's philosophy, concede that his method is very successful. (Berger argues that

the concept of consciousness-raising in itself presupposes that someone's consciousness—the teacher's—is higher than others—the learners'—and thus imposes one person's information and values upon another.)

Readers interested in reading Freire's works are referred to *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, Cambridge, Mass., 1970), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Seabury, 1974) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder, 1970). Many people find Freire's theories difficult to understand. A highly readable 64-page pamphlet by Cynthia Brown explaining Freire's ideas and describing his work in Brazil is available for \$2.50 from the Alternate Schools Network, 1105 W. Lawrence, Room 210, Chicago, Ill. 60640. □

Liberation and Literacy: A Feminist Concern

It is interesting to note that feminists have found a route to understanding the conditions of their lives that compares to the programs that Freire and his followers have evolved to achieve literacy in Third World nations.

Basic to both the Third World literacy campaigns inspired by Freire and to the feminist movement are “consciousness-raising” and “liberation.” These two words reflect the central questions of oppressed people: What are the realities of our lives? What can I do to change these realities?

An examination of the methodologies practiced in many “feminist classrooms” reveals educational practices that are similar to those developed by Freire.¹ The guiding principle of both systems is anti-authoritarianism. Both methods encourage students to believe in the authenticity, validity and importance of their own experiences, which become the focal point of the educational process. In both cases, the classroom environment is informal and there is peer teaching with meaningful interactions between teachers and learners.

Freire insists that the basic materials and vocabulary of an effective literacy program must be keyed to representations of the students' daily lives, which is similar to the emphasis on “life materials” in a feminist classroom. Through discussion, students become conscious of how their lives have been controlled by society. The objective is to bring about the awareness they need to control their own lives and, further, to change society.

Essential to feminist education, moreover, is analysis leading to a new interpretation of existing learning materials. Students are encouraged to analyze and criticize the contents of materials by understanding the conditions and culture that shaped the lives of the writers.

In contrast to traditional education, which both Freire and feminist educators believe results in domestication rather than liberation, these new methodologies stress the importance of developing a critical analysis of the realities of one's life. This is the first step to positive actions that can reshape those realities and result in eventual liberation.—Ruth S. Meyers

¹Readers wishing to learn more about the “feminist classroom” will be interested in the findings of the meetings held this past summer in Copenhagen, Denmark, where 500 feminist scholars and educators met to discuss women's studies. A report on the conference will be published in the Spring, 1981 issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, available after April 1 from The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, New York 11568 for \$3.50 per copy plus \$1. postage and handling.