

# CUBA'S YO, SÍ PUEDO. A GLOBAL LITERACY MOVEMENT?

**Bob Boughton & Deborah Durnan**  
*University of New England, Australia*

**ABSTRACT:** Since it was first trialled in Haiti in 2000, Cuba's *Yo, Si Puedo* model for mounting mass adult literacy campaigns has mobilised over six million people in twenty-nine countries to acquire basic literacy. Despite this global reach, the model has attracted almost no close study from adult education and literacy researchers in the English-speaking world. Cuba's unique south-south approach to international aid and cooperation and its extensive experience with mass literacy campaigns over more than five decades makes this model a classic case study for postcolonial education theory and practice. This paper begins this analysis, by identifying some of the key elements of the *Yo Si Puedo* model and its emancipatory potential. It is based on evidence collected in an extended participatory action research project during *Yo, Si Puedo's* deployment in Timor-Leste's national literacy campaign (2007-2011) and in a recent pilot study of the model in three Indigenous communities in Australia (2012-2014).

## **Introduction**

On the island of Atauro, a few kilometres off the north coast of Timor-Leste, a group of adult literacy students begin the week by walking several hours from their hill-top village to the town below. There they fill containers with fuel, before walking back up the hill to fill the diesel generator which will power the TV and DVD player on which they watch their literacy lessons for the rest of the week. Three thousand kilometres south east of Atauro, a class of Australian Aboriginal students watch an English-language version of the same lessons in the offices of

the Murrawarri Land Council in the remote community of Enngonia. Fifteen thousand kilometres further east, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, staff of a small NGO, UMMEP, meet to discuss the literacy campaign they have been conducting since 2003 in the Indigenous communities in their country's north west.

While none of these groups may know of the other, they are inextricably linked by the presence of a Cuban literacy adviser, and the model for building literacy which each group is using. All three countries are part of a global adult literacy campaign, known by its Spanish name, *Yo, Sí Puedo* (Yes, I Can). Over the last fifteen years, Cuban advisers have taken this campaign to twenty-nine countries in Latin America, the Pacific, Africa and Europe, helping more than six million people, most of them in the Global South, to acquire basic literacy. Yet this remarkable achievement of postcolonial education has gone almost completely unnoticed in the English language literature of international and comparative adult education.

We first encountered *Yo, Sí Puedo* (YSP) in Mozambique in 2006, when it was being trialled there (Lind et al, 2006). From 2007 until 2011, we undertook a participatory action research (PAR) project evaluating its use in the national literacy campaign in Timor-Leste (Boughton, 2010; Boughton, 2012; Boughton and Durnan, 2014). Since 2012, we have been undertaking another PAR study of the pilot stage of a YSP campaign in three remote Aboriginal communities in Australia (Boughton et al, 2013). In 2010 and 2013, we also spent time in Cuba, interviewing people involved with the development of the YSP model; and in 2013

we interviewed members of the organisation running the campaign in Argentina. In this paper, we outline the origins of this Cuban mass campaign model and describe its current global reach, before moving on to identify some of its key features as they emerged during its deployment in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia. Our intention is to challenge the lack of recognition afforded to this global phenomenon and to the “southern theory” (Connell, 2007) underlying it in the field of adult education and literacy studies. In the final section of the paper, we consider the relationship between this Cuban approach to adult literacy education and the emancipatory tradition of popular education most commonly associated with the ideas of Paulo Freire (Mayo, 2013).

### **The Origins of *Yo, Sí Puedo* (YSP)**

*Yo, Sí Puedo* is not simply a method for teaching literacy. Rather it is a model for mounting a low-cost mass adult literacy campaign across regions and countries, involving extensive coordination and mobilisation of the all the relevant government and non-government agencies and actors and the population as a whole. Its origins lie in the 1961 Cuban literacy campaign, one of the most iconic, but by no means the only, national literacy campaigns of the twentieth century (Lorenzetto and Neys, 1965; Kozol, 1978; Abendroth, 2009). While the Cuban campaign was modelled on other campaigns undertaken by revolutionary and newly-independent governments earlier in the century, the scale and ambition of the Cuban model helped to encourage others, including Paulo Freire in Brazil (Mackie, 1980, p. 4), to attempt something similar. As part of its international solidarity work, Cuba sent advisers

with experience of the 1961 campaign to several African and Latin American countries who were attempting this, including Angola in 1976, Guinea-Bissau in 1978 and Nicaragua in 1979-80 (Pérez Cruz, 2007). In this period, the mass adult literacy campaign became a central feature of adult education work in countries of the Global South, sometimes following the Cuban example, but often also developed on the basis of national experiences (Arnove and Graff, 1987; Lind, 1988). A high point appeared to have been reached in 1981, when delegates gathered in Udaipur, India, to formulate a strategy for a global campaign, to be led by UNESCO (Bhola, 1984).

However, the enthusiasm for mass campaigns which swept through the adult education movement in the 1960s and 1970s came up against opposition from the World Bank, which used its increasing control over international education aid funding in the 1980s to call a halt to this phenomenon (Jones, 1990). In an unfortunate coincidence, this occurred alongside the rising popularity in universities in the North of the 'New Literacy Studies' scholars (e.g. Street, 2001), whose closely observed ethnographies of local literacy practices tended to 'deconstruct' the emancipatory claims of mass literacy campaigns (Boughton, in press).

Cuba, however, persisted, developing its expertise and providing it to countries where the political will to overcome mass illiteracy remained strong enough to overcome World Bank opposition. Cuba's literacy missions often accompanied its medical missions, which were also working all over the world (Kirk & Earsman, 2009; Anderson, 2010). This unique model of south-south cooperation was

an integral part of its international relations policy, reflecting both its strategic interest in developing allies to help counter the implacable hostility of the United States to its Revolution, alongside its commitment to universal literacy as a fundamental human right (Corona Gonzales et al, 2012).

### **Cuba's International Literacy Missions**

The Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC), one of a network of fifteen Institutes of Pedagogy throughout Cuba, occupies a three-storey building within a huge educational complex in Havana's western suburbs known as Ciudad Libertad (City of Freedom). Prior to the Revolution's victory on 1 January 1959, this site was home to the largest military garrison of the Batista dictatorship (Fagen, 1964, p. 41). Today, along with IPLAC, it also houses primary and secondary schools, offices of the Ministry of Education, teacher training facilities, and a Museum of Literacy.

The Institute offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in education, with research students undertaking Masters degrees and Doctorates in Education. However, unlike Cuba's other Institutes of Pedagogy which train Cuba's own teaching workforce, IPLAC's students come from countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa where Cuba is providing its educational assistance programs (Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012); or are Cuban nationals preparing for work overseas. The date of its establishment is significant, just one year after the collapse of Cuba's main international allies

and trade partners, the USSR and the Eastern bloc, which caused a catastrophic downturn in the Cuban economy. While most western countries respond to economic crises by cutting back on education and health services, and especially international aid, Cuba elected to expand its own education system, and its relationships of solidarity and support with other countries of the global south.

In 2000, IPLAC created a separate Department of Literacy, responding to growing demands for its expertise. According to its Director, this had begun in 1995, when the then President of Niger asked Cuban President Fidel Castro for assistance with the problem of illiteracy in his country. An initial analysis revealed that the illiteracy rate was over 50%, too many to reach with trained teachers, and so Castro suggested IPLAC develop a mass program which could be delivered by radio. When the Niger President was killed before this could begin, the new approach was instead trialled in Haiti and Nicaragua. IPLAC then began experimenting with the use of TV and, again at Castro's suggestion, incorporating the use of numbers to help people learn letters, on the assumption that numbers are more familiar in everyday life to people who are illiterate. This became known as the alphanumeric method, and forms one of the innovative features of YSP, discussed in more detail below (José Real, pers.com., May 2010).

Castro has long been an outspoken advocate of the importance of literacy for social emancipation, and he played a major role throughout the 1961 campaign (Kozol, 1978). He shares this commitment with many other revolutionary socialist and anti-

colonialist leaders of the twentieth century, who believed that mass adult education was essential to develop the values and skills base needed to chart an alternative development path to capitalism (Youngman, 1986). Recognising this, Paulo Freire coined the term “pedagogue of the revolution” to describe Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the national liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 103). Freire also specifically acknowledged his debt to Ché Guevara’s philosophy of adult education, recently analysed by Holst (2009; 2010).

In 2000, the year that IPLAC established its Literacy Department, Castro launched the ‘Battle of Ideas’, a movement with young people and communities inside Cuba to re-affirm the importance of the ideology which animated the first years of the revolution. This movement promoted the ideas of Ché Guevara and the nineteenth century independence leader, José Martí, both of whom had placed high priority on mass or popular education and the ‘subjective’ aspects of social change. It also made an explicit ‘self-criticism’ of the mechanistic model of socialism which Cuba had imported from the Soviet Union, including its focus on formal education (Kapcia, 2005). In this context, Cuban educators working closely with the growing popular movements throughout Latin American were encouraged to experiment with new forms of popular education, and the influence of these changes was reflected in the model which IPLAC was developing for mass literacy work in Venezuela, Bolivia and elsewhere (Nydia Gonzales, pers.com., May 2010).

## **The Yo, Sí Puedo Campaign Model**

YSP was developed by a group of Cuban educationalists with significant prior experience in literacy campaigns and international education. One was Dr Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez. Now in his seventies, Canfux's first experience with literacy work dated from his time as a volunteer teacher sent to work in the rural areas immediately following the defeat of Batista (Remple, 2014). He was then recruited to work on the 1961 campaign in Cuba with Dr Raúl Ferrer, the architect of that campaign and a friend of Freire (Kozol, 1978). Canfux became an adviser to the Ministry of Education in Guinéa Bissau in 1978, the year in which that country embarked on the literacy campaign in which Freire took part, and to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education of in 1979-80, at the time of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade. Another key person was Dr. Leonela Relys Díaz. At the age of 14, she had been a 'Brigadista' in the Cuban campaign, travelling as a high school student to the districts to live with rural families and teach them to read. Subsequently trained as a teacher, Relys led the development of the alphanumeric radio literacy program in Haiti, then worked on its adaptation for television, in Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Brazil. Other outstanding Cuban educators who played key roles were José del Real Hernández, currently Director of IPLAC's Literacy Department; and Grisel Ponce Suárez, who worked with Maori educators in New Zealand in 2002-03 to develop Greenlight, an English-language audio-visual academic literacy

program which utilised the YSP principles (Pérez Cruz n.d.; Canfux Gutiérrez et al, 2004; Pers.comms. Canfux, Ponce, del Real, Havana, May 2010)

IPLAC's approach is a response to an objective reality, namely that it is impossible to lower illiteracy rates on a national scale in most countries where the need is greatest without a simple low cost method, capable of reaching very large numbers of illiterate adults in a short space of time. For this reason, one of the key features is a set of sixty-four one hour lessons on DVD, which students watch under the supervision of local facilitators (sometimes called monitors), who have received a basic training from the Cuban in-country adviser team. However, the lessons of themselves are only one part of the model. In UNESCO's words:

[T]he *YSP* [*Yo, sí Puedo*] method is in fact more than a method. It would be more appropriate to understand it as a literacy training model that goes beyond processes, materials, strategies etc., as it includes, both explicitly and implicitly, concepts of literacy training, learning, life skills and social mobilization, and involves a wide range of actors with varied roles from the beneficiaries of the literacy training to other stakeholders such as state entities and other concerned institutions (UNESCO, 2006, p. 4).

The YSP model combines distance education technology with a national system of social mobilisation, control and coordination in which the lessons form the second phase of a three phase process. The first phase, which the Cuban advisers in Timor-Leste and Australia called "socialisation

and mobilisation”, is an extensive process of building local, regional and national structures to provide overall leadership of the campaign, and to encourage communities to take art. The third phase is “post-literacy” in which graduates from the YSP classes are encouraged to undertake further activities which consolidate and extend the newly-acquired literacy. Importantly, YSP is adapted and modified to suit local conditions in the host country (Lind et al, 2006; Boughton, 2010; Boughton et al, 2013).

From 2001 onwards, YSP was deployed in increasing numbers of countries, including Venezuela, where the campaign, known as Mission Robinson, is credited with eradicating illiteracy by 2005 (Lamrani, 2012). In 2002, the model received an honourable mention in UNESCO’s International Literacy Prize. In January 2005, IPLAC and the Ministry of Education sponsored a World Literacy Congress in Havana, whose final resolution called on UNESCO to endorse YSP and provide its patronage:

... to ensure that Cuba’s bilateral cooperation in the struggle to eradicate illiteracy will be backed up by the authority and legitimacy of the General Conference of UNESCO; and to take up and promote that programme (YSP) and mobilize the will of and contributions from other international sources of cooperation (Cited Lind et al, 2006).

By December 2005, when the first Cuban mission arrived in Timor-Leste, YSP was operating in fifteen countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guinéa Bissau,

**Table 1. Yo, Sí Puedo campaigns, by country**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Source</b>
Latin America & the Caribbean (n=17)	Argentina	Fundacion UMMEP. (2013)
	Bolivia	Artaraz (2012); Lamrani (2012)
	Brazil	Documents & exhibits of Cuba's International Literacy Missions. (n.d)
	Colombia	UNESCO (2006)
	Dominican Republic	Canfux Gutteres et al (2006)
	Ecuador	Artaraz (2012)
	Grenada	Grenada's "Yes I Can" Adult Literacy Programme. (2008); <i>Yes I Can</i> DVDs, held by authors on license from IPLAC.
	El Salvador	Canfux Gutteres et al (2006)
	Haiti	Canfux Gutteres et al (2006)
	Honduras	Alvarado (2008)
	Mexico	UNESCO (2006)
	Nicaragua	Canfux Gutteres et al (2006); Parra (2009); Muhr (2013)
	Panama	Torres (2009)
	Paraguay	UNESCO (2006)
Peru	Canfux Gutteres et al (2006)	
Uruguay	Canfux Gutteres et al	

<b>Region</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Source</b>
		(2006)
	Venezuela	Wagner (2005); Reyes (2011); Artaraz (2012); Lamrani (2012)
North America (2)	Canada	ArrowMight Canada & IPLAC (n.d)
	USA – New Mexico	LALA (n.d.)
Europe (1)	Spain	Artaraz (2012)
Asia Pacific (3)	Australia	Boughton et al (2013)
	New Zealand	Canfux Gutteres et al (2005); Documents & exhibits of Cuba's International Literacy Missions. (n.d)
	Timor-Leste	Boughton (2010; 2012)
Africa (6)	Angola	Cuban News Agency 20/5/13
	Guinéa Bissau	Lopez & Herrera (2012)
	Mozambique	UNESCO (2006)
	Namibia	Mwaala, E. (Pers.com., 8/2/13)
	Nigeria	Documents & exhibits of Cuba's International Literacy Missions. (n.d)
	South Africa	Mlotshwa (2009)

Haïti, Honduras, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela (Torres, 2005; Lind et al, 2006). Since then, the number of countries employing the model has risen to twenty-nine, as set out in Table 1, below. While UNESCO

provided financial support in some countries with materials production, including Nigeria and Mozambique, the Executive declined to provide its full endorsement, producing instead a fairly critical report, which congratulated Cuba for its work to date, while identifying several aspects of the model requiring further elaboration and improvement (UNESCO, 2006).

### **Yo, Sí Puedo Pedagogy**

Over more than fifty years, Cuban educationalists have developed a practice which they are now in the process of theorising as a “Cuban School of Literacy” (Jaime Canfux, pers.com., May 2010). The core of this theory is derived from the educational philosophy of the Cuban revolution, formed by one of the leading thinkers of the Cuban independence movement in the late nineteenth century, José Martí. While not well-known among English speaking education scholars and practitioners, Martí is known throughout Latin America as one of the most important founders of its popular education movement (Streck, 2008). In Cuba, every school has a bust or statue of Martí at its entrance, and quotes from Martí’s writings will be found sprinkled liberally through the writings and speeches of Cuba’s political leaders and its education academics. At the core of Martí’s teaching was a philosophy of humanism which was based on the simple idea of the unity of all humanity.

Like Freire, Martí believed that the central purpose of life was to actualise our universal humanity, such that no individual could be free unless everyone was free. From this core belief came

a commitment to solidarity, the idea that our duty as human beings is to free ourselves and everyone else from the bondage of colonialism and oppression. For this to happen however, people had to learn, and to learn they had to become literate. Universal literacy, in other words, was the first step on the path to human liberation (Nassif, 2000).

### ***Contextualisation***

The ‘universalism’ of Martí’s aspiration exists in a dialectical relationship with the specifics of the local reality in which the model is deployed, and the term “contextualisation” is used by the Cubans to describe the process of adapting the model to the circumstances of the country, region and community where it is being used. Contextualisation occurs across all three phases of the Campaign and is a continuous process. However this adaptation takes place within the Campaign structure itself and within the *Yo, Sí Puedo* curriculum. In other words, the integrity of Campaign model including the lessons is maintained. Each community that enters the campaign – and each region, and country – decides what aspects of the Campaign model can be changed to make it more responsive to local conditions.

In the pilot stage of the campaign in Aboriginal communities in Australia, the campaign was known by its English name, Yes, I Can, and contextualisation was applied to each phase. During Phase 1 (Mobilisation and socialisation), an initial review of the local context helped to determine the selection of an appropriate lead agency, the recruitment of local staff, the choice of location for

the campaign office and training facility, the hours of work, the selection of working group members, the organisation of the launches and graduation classes, the local sponsors and partners approached, the priority areas for the local household survey, and a significant amount of the content of the initial staff training.

The project team also took account of legal and administrative structures specific to Australia and these communities e.g. government agency requirements on participants in receipt of social security benefits, school attendance legislation and those of the Probation and Parole service. Most importantly, the community household survey, which is a mandated feature of the model, provided a wealth of information about the issues which were most important to people with low literacy in these specific communities, information which then helped to inform the overall way that the project team support for the campaign, including the choice of local slogans and the words used in publicity brochures. During Phase 2, the *Yes, I Can* Lessons, the contextual understandings built through the socialisation and mobilisation work were incorporated into the way the lessons are conducted, but without changing the basic lesson sequence and structure. Other changes to take account of local conditions included undertaking pre- and post-literacy assessments using an Australia-specific national instrument, the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF); developing a model lesson plan structure for each lesson; development of practice activities for each lesson which included local words, phrases, and examples; relating the positive

messages to the local context; and relating unfamiliar words and phrases to local usage.

In Phase 3, “Post-literacy”, all the activities were determined in consultation with local staff and the participants, and many were specific to the particular needs of these communities and delivered in partnership with local agencies, such as the Aboriginal Health Service and the local Public School. As most participants in these remote communities were unemployed, the activities also had to comply with the requirements of the government income-support provider, Centrelink. Where possible, they were designed to provide a pathway over time into training courses available through local vocational education providers.

### ***The Lessons***

The Cuban-made DVD lessons are a defining feature of the *Yes I Can* model. When participants arrive for their class, they sit in chairs, behind desks, with a large TV screen at the front of the room. The facilitator introduces the lesson briefly, and then the students watch a 30-minute DVD on a TV screen. On the DVD, they see a class of five “actor-students” learning how to read and write from an “actor-teacher” and an “actor-assistant teacher”. From time to time, topics being talked about in the class will be illustrated with footage of scenes from the region of the actor-students. In Australia in the pilot stage, DVDs from the 2003 Grenada campaign are being used. During the lesson, the facilitator stops the DVD, so the “real” students can discuss a topic, or complete an activity in their workbooks which they have just seen completed by the actor-students.

Following the DVD lesson, participants spend another 30 minutes doing practice activities. Watching the DVD lesson and completing the practice activities takes a maximum of one hour.

The teacher on the DVD uses a “traditional” phonics instruction method, building letter and sound awareness, and the technique of writing, then the ability to hear, read and write letters, words and phrases, progressing by the final lessons to sentences and paragraphs. The “alphanumeric” technique mentioned above means that each letter is learned in the initial 42 lessons through association with a specific number, using a Guide Table e.g. 1 – a; 2 – e; 3 – i; 4 – o; all the way to 26, in the case of the English version. The Cuban rationale for this is that, even in communities with very little literacy, there is some familiarity with numbers because of money and markets. The numbers correspond to the importance of the letter in constructing words, e.g., in the English version, vowels are 1–5; and the subsequent numbering follows as closely as possible to the frequency of each consonant’s use in the language of instruction.

The lessons are divided into three stages. There are 7 basic introductory lessons, 45 reading, writing and revision lessons, and 12 consolidation and extension lessons with assessment activities. Lesson 1 introduces the model, and Lesson 64 is an evaluation activity for the facilitators. Lessons 2–7 are designed for people with no prior experience of reading and writing, and include exercises to practise holding a pen and forming simple shapes. Because almost all the participants in Australia have had some basic instruction in the past, these

lessons were dropped and students went straight from Lesson 1 to Lesson 8.

Each lesson follows a predictable structured sequence, which the Cubans call an “algorithm” and which the students quickly learn. As further discussed below, the lesson begins with a discussion topic, which introduces a key letter or word. Easily recognisable icons in each lesson cue the students to observe, listen, speak and write, following the example of the students on screen. From time to time, the lesson is paused to allow students to complete exercises in pre-printed workbooks or writing pads, exercises they have just seen the actor-students do on screen. Each class ends with another period of practice of the letters and words learned during that session. As suits people with minimal or no prior literacy and minimal confidence as learners, the initial steps are very small, beginning with motor skills, then vowels and consonants, then diphthongs, reading, generating and writing words using these graphemes.

Progress remains slow until lesson 46, at which point participants begin to write sentences using “connector words” to form paragraphs. Along the way, very basic punctuation is also taught. From Lesson 50 onward, comprehension of more complex blocks of text is regularly checked, and students learn to fill out forms with basic personal data. Then, in the last eight lessons, students complete exercises which form the basis of the assessment of their competence at the exit point, in that they learn to produce in their workbooks a simple letter to a friend including description and opinion.

An outstanding feature of this structured pedagogy, which emerged from our direct classroom

observations, is that local facilitators quickly learn how to deliver the lessons through following the example of the actor-teacher, while, at the same time, students are learning to become literacy learners by the same process, watching and copying the learner behaviour of the actor-students. A 'community of practice' is quickly established, and is one of the aspects of the model which students and staff most value.

### **Assessment**

There is no formal assessment in the YSP model. Instead, the local staff and the Australian and Cuban advisers review student progress by observing the class and the student work that is completed in the pre-printed workbooks and locally-generated worksheets. This is in effect a continuous assessment process. Detailed weekly records are maintained showing who is "advancing" and who is not, and those who are falling behind or struggling receive additional support.

All students who complete the 64 Yes, I Can lessons are able to fill out basic forms; write short personal letters; write up to 2 paragraphs on a personal topic; and read and comprehend up to 2 paragraphs on a familiar topic. Obviously some students can perform at a higher level but this is the minimum standard. Importantly students gain significantly in terms of self-esteem and confidence, ability to follow a daily routine, ability to complete tasks, ability to work as part of a team, ability to manage own time, capacity to identify as a learner, and valuing literacy and learning as a core part of their own life, family life and community life.

## **Positive messages**

This critical element in the *Yes, I Can* model is a direct descendant of the ‘themes’ that were utilised in the 1961 Cuban manual (Fagen, 1964), and can be compared also to the “generative words” and themes that Freire developed to use in his culture circles (Schugurensky, 2000, pp. 59-62). At the beginning of each lesson, the actor-teacher introduces a simple sentence which includes a letter or word to be learned in that lesson, but which also contains a particular message in relation to attitudes and values. For example, the DVD lessons used in the Australian pilot include the following phrases: “Open the gate” (Lesson 1); “People love peace”; “Take care of the sea” (from over fishing and pollution); “Our future is secure”; “Give me a hand (solidarity)”; and “Music is part of our culture”.

After watching the “actor-student” class discuss this topic on the DVD, the local facilitator stops the player to allow a discussion to occur in the “live” class. Students are asked: “What do you think about this message?” or “Is this important here for us?”. The aim is to stimulate reflection about the social conditions in which the students live. This also helps to contextualise the lesson to the local circumstances of the students, and it generates new local words, using the letter for that day’s lesson.

## **Is YSP Emancipatory?**

A common response from colleagues to whom we describe the YSP model is to ask to what extent it is ‘Freirian’, i.e. consistent with the pedagogical philosophy of Paulo Freire. At one level, this may be

the wrong question to ask, since, as Kane (2001, p. 53) writes:

Given the variety of interpretations accorded to Freire's work, including many which bewildered Freire himself, it has become almost meaningless to talk, in the abstract, of a 'Freirian' approach to education.

Nevertheless, the question reflects a genuine concern that YSP appears less participatory and more 'teacher-centred' than Freire would have supported. Whether or not the model conforms to one's idea of Freirian pedagogy, it is still important to ask if YSP, as it is implemented, is an empowering and emancipatory process, one which properly belongs with the tradition of transformative adult education known in Latin America and many other places as popular education.

The year in which we are writing this, 2014, marks fifty years since the coup in Brazil in which the Armed Forces, supported by the United States, overthrew the government of President Goulart which had only just appointed Paulo Freire to head the National Literacy Commission (Mackie, 1980, p.4). Freire's plan to mount a mass literacy campaign was thus aborted before he had even begun. While he did take part in some campaigns in subsequent years, including in Guinéa Bissau and Nicaragua, Freire's most influential writings were produced during his time at Harvard in the late 1960s, before he had time to test his ideas in a truly mass campaign. In a sense, therefore, the real question is not the extent to which campaigns, which are a reality, are 'Freirian'; but whether and to

what extent Freire's ideas can be implemented in a mass campaign?

Historically, Cuba's 1961 campaign pre-dated Freire's initial work in Brazil, and was one of its inspirations. The Cuban manual for its high-school facilitators included a series of themes which paralleled the generative themes which Freire developed through his culture circles (Fagen, 1964). While they were codified in a facilitators' manual (*Alfabetecemos or Let's Teach Literacy*), they were derived from the close knowledge of the condition of the peasants and the issues of importance to them which the Cuban educators had acquired through the experience in the guerilla campaign and in the immediate aftermath of the victory in 1959, when thousands of volunteer teachers left the cities to re-open primary schools. By the same token, the overall YSP model, the lessons, student workbooks and facilitator manuals are the product of another fifty years of continuous Cuban experience working in mass literacy campaigns, a record unmatched by any other group of professional literacy scholars and practitioners in the world.

Felipe Pérez Cruz, a historian of Cuba's literacy work, writes that Freire, on his part, was well aware of the Cuban approach and that he endorsed it, when he met Raul Ferrer, Cuba's Education Vice Minister and one of the 1961 campaign architects in 1965 at the World Conference Against Illiteracy in Tehran. Pérez Cruz interviewed Cuban advisers with whom Freire discussed the issue again in Angola in 1978 and in Nicaragua in 1979-80:

From the point of view of the Cuban educators,  
the Freirean method of generative words

required a teacher or activist with a relatively high level of education and schooling. The need to massify (sic) the number of people who would be made literate, as was the case in the Cuban campaign of 1961 as much as in the one that was underway in Angola, forced them to enlist literacy workers who could read and write but did not necessarily go beyond the general low educational level inherited from the deposed colonial and neocolonial systems. Freire expressed his satisfaction with the rationale provided by the Cuban advisors. In São Tomé, Freire would later experiment with the Cuban idea of the primer and manual (Pérez Cruz, 2007, p. 696)

Likewise, the US critical pedagogy theorist, Jonathan Kozol, attests to the bond between Freire and Ferrer:

Freire and Ferrer are trusted friends. Their views have not been borrowed, each from the other; rather, they have been inspired by a common viewpoint and shared experience. Unlike most other contemporary educators of renown or power, Freire and Ferrer have forged their pedagogic views among the people they set out to teach, close to the soil, living in the villages and homes of the poor, toiling beside the campesinos to win both land and liberation (Kozol, 1978, p.354).

Some Cuban educators, it is true, were initially critical of Freire. However, in 1986, the leading Mexican popular educator Carlos Núñez organised

an adult education conference in Havana, initiating a relationship which continued over many years, and inspiring a group of Cuban adult educators who since then have worked to promote the ideas of both Freire and the wider Latin American movement. (pers. comms., Nydia Gonzales & Felipe Pérez, May 2010). Moreover, many Latin American scholars argue that this tradition did not begin with Freire, but can be traced back to the work of Jose Marti in the first Cuban revolution in the nineteenth century (Streck, 2008).

A related criticism has come from scholars identified with the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Street 2001), who argue that mass campaigns ignore and devalue local literacy practices, in favour of a nationally-driven agenda. Our evaluation of the pilot in Australia demonstrates that this does not apply to the *Yes, I Can* model, in that it was contextualised to local circumstances as much as possible, and adapted to local 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 accords with their own cultures and histories. That said, not all elements of the model are negotiable; inclusivity is mandated, as is tight central monitoring and control. In this, *YSP* continues the tradition of the 1961 Cuban campaign, of which Raul Ferrer said:

... we did not want a random, affable, but drifting atmosphere to be the substitute for old time methods of control. We did not want the kind of aimless atmosphere identified with

certain liberal fashions such as Summerhill.  
(Quoted Kozol, 1978, p. 350)

So while some may claim that the structured and pre-developed character of the lessons and the central monitoring and control disqualifies the YSP model from being called popular education, we agree with Schugurensky (2011) who says that to focus only on Freire's literacy lessons and culture circles is to ignore the breadth of his philosophy and practice.

In the end, as much as local solutions are desirable, social change of the kind Freire advocated, able to transform the intolerable social circumstances in which millions now live, will only come through international movements on a scale not seen up until now. The YSP model therefore belongs firmly in the tradition of transformative or emancipatory education, because it makes it possible for very large numbers of people to take their first steps into the literate world, which is an essential pre-requisite for mass social emancipation. While low literacy is not always a barrier to participation in social change movements, it substantially reduces the capacity of such movements, as they grow, to maintain participatory democratic processes. The Cuban proponents of the model and their supporters do not harbour any illusion that such emancipation happens overnight. Rather, it is, as Myles Horton wrote, a 'long haul' (Horton et al, 1991), a historical process which is the work of several generations. At the end of a successful YSP campaign, the society will have begun to change, in that many more of its most marginalised people will have acquired the capacity

to begin reading, writing, speaking and reflecting about their lives, thus creating a base from which to move forward. Beyond that, the impact will depend on the local context, and its capacity to foster a wider social movement for change. Such a movement, if it already exists or emerges in future, will be able to connect with many more people who not only have basic literacy skills, but also the desire to go further, and the means to demand of society that they should be allowed to do so.

Our observations in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia confirm that one of the most frequent observations by campaign participants, facilitators and organisers is that, as a result of the campaign, many more people now believe in the possibility of change, not only for themselves but for their children. They have thus begun to move outside the 'culture of silence' where poverty and social exclusion are a fixed fate, and taken their first steps into a different culture, one in which another world is possible. The campaign also begins the development of a workforce to assist those that want to take the next steps, as the village-based facilitators and coordinators also acquire new skills and a new attitude as a result of their participation in the campaign. This workforce can, with the right support, become the backbone of a more inclusive mass education system in which the YSP graduates will be able to continue their learning.

At this stage, it is not possible to say what the longer-term impact of the campaigns in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia will be on the ability of the participants to take more control of the development process. What can be said, however, is that the Cuban literacy missions have introduced into both

countries a way of working which challenges all of us to think in different ways about how to address the problem of mass illiteracy.

## **Conclusion**

The international experience of mass literacy campaigns demonstrates that, in order for a campaign to lead to significant social change in a community, it has to become supported by a wider movement which has a program for development and social transformation (Arnové and Graff, 2008). Existing patterns of educational inequality, whereby some adults are literate whereas others are not, are the result of institutionalised practices in the past, and these continue to have an effect in the present. As Cuba demonstrated in the 1960s, however, the mobilisation required to raise literacy levels in the population is a first step towards challenging these inherited inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth. It creates a base from which other changes can be pursued, not only among the previously illiterate, but also among those who have been mobilised to support them.

The *Yo, Sí Puedo* model has given rise to a global literacy movement, involving millions of people across 29 countries. These mass literacy campaigns are attracting considerable support around the world, from governments, especially those with a social reform agenda; from literacy advocates and practitioners working through governments and international agencies; and, not least, from the millions of people who choose to participate in them. One advantage of the

international character of the *Yo, Sí Puedo* model is that it connects people to events beyond their own community and their own country, where they can see what has been achieved in other places. Ultimately, though, the test of their value will be whether or not they have a positive impact upon the populations, societies and communities involved, something which only empirical research on actual campaigns, like the studies we are reporting here, can reveal. The next stage of this research program is a comparative longitudinal study of the impact of the campaign in a selection of communities in Timor-Leste and Australia (Boughton and Durnan, 2014).

## References

- Abendroth, M. (2009). *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship*. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books.
- Alvarado, R. V. (2008). Local Management for Literacy Teaching with the “Yo sí Puedo” (Yes, I can) model. Paper presented at the Regional Literacy and CONFINTEA VI Preparatory Conference in Latin America and the Caribbean, 10-13 September 2008, Mexico City, Mexico.
- Anderson, T. (2010). Cuban Health Cooperation in Timor-Leste and the South West Pacific *South-South Cooperation: A Challenge to the Aid System?* Quezon City: IBON Foundation.

Arnove, R. F and Graff, H. J. (eds.). (1987). *National Literacy Campaigns. Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New York and London: Plenum Press.

Artaraz, K. (2012). Cuba's Internationalism Revisited: Exporting Literacy, ALBA, and a New Paradigm for South–South Collaboration. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 31: 22-37.

Bhola, H. S. (1984). *Campaigns for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century, with a memorandum to decision-makers*. Paris UNESCO.

Boughton, B. (2010). Back to the future? Timor-Leste, Cuba and the return of the mass literacy campaign. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* 18(2): 23-40.

Boughton, B. (2012). Adult literacy, popular education and Cuban educational aid in Timor-Leste. In A. Hickling-Hudson, J. C. Gonzalez and R. Preston (eds.), *The Capacity to Share. A study of Cuba's International Cooperation in Educational Development*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & Leblanch, J. C. (2013). An Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Australia using Yes I Can. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 21(1): 5-32.

Boughton, B and Durnan, D. (2014). Cuba's "Yes, I Can" mass adult literacy campaign model in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia: A comparative study. *International Review of Education*, (1-22).

- Boughton, B. (In press). Popular education and mass adult literacy campaigns. Beyond the 'new literacy studies'. In K. Yasukawa & S. Black (eds.), *Beyond economic interests: Critical perspectives in adult literacy & numeracy in a globalised world*. Rotterdam, Boston and Taipei: Sense.
- Canfux Gutiérrez, J., Pérez García, Á. M., Relys Díaz, L and del Real Hernández, J. (2006). Estudio sobre políticas y programas de Alfabetización y Educación Básica de Jóvenes y Adultos (Study about the Youth and Adult Literacy and Adult Basic Education Politics and Programme) . Paper presented at the Association for the Development of Education in Africa. Biennale de l'éducation en Afrique. Libreville, Gabon, 27-31 March 2006.
- Canfux Gutiérrez, J., Relys Díaz, L., Ponce Suarez, D. G., Jimenez, E. M., Lafita, A. T., del Real Hernández, J., et al. (2005). *Desde la alfabetización presencial al yo, sí puedo* (From face-to-face literacy training to Yes, I can). La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Pueblo y Educación.
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern Theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Cuban News Agency. (20/5/13). Angolan Authorities Stress Effectiveness of Cuban Literacy Method.
- Fagen, R. R. (1964). *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education*. Stanford: Stanford University.

Freire, P and Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy. Reading the Word & the World*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey.

Fundacion UMMEP. (2013). Revista institucional No.1 (Annual Report, unpublished. Copy held by authors). Buenos Aries, Argentina: UMMEP. See <http://www.fundacionummep.org.ar/category/novidades/yo-si-puedo/> )

Gonzalez, J. C., Hickling-Hudson, A and Lehr, S. (2012). Challenging Educational Underdevelopment: The Cuban Solidarity Approach as a Model of South-South cooperation. In A. Hickling-Hudson, J. C. Gonzalez & R. Preston (Eds.), *The Capacity to Share. A study of Cuba's International Cooperation in Educational Development*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hickling-Hudson, A. (2009) Southern Theory and its dynamics for postcolonial education. In Roland Coloma (ed.) *Postcolonial Challenges in Education*. New York, Peter Lang.

Hickling-Hudson, A., Gonzalez, J. C and Preston, R. (eds.). (2012). *The Capacity to Share. A study of Cuba's International Cooperation in Educational Development*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Holst, J. D. (2009). The pedagogy of Ernesto Ché Guevara. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28(2):149-173.

Holst, J. (2010). Social Justice and Dispositions for Adult Education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60 (4): 249– 260.

- Horton, M., Kohl, J and Kohl, H. (1991). *The long haul: an autobiography*. New York: Doubleday.
- Jones, P. W. (1990). UNESCO and the Politics of Global Literacy. *Comparative Education Review*, 34 (1): 41-60.
- Kane, L. (2001). *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London: Latin America Bureau.
- Kirk, J. M and Erisman, H. M. (2009). *Cuban Medical Internationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kozol, J. (1978). A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba. *Harvard Educational Review*, 48 (Summer), pp. 341-377.
- Lind, A. (1988). *Adult Literacy Lessons and Promises. Mozambican Literacy Campaigns 1978-1982*. Stockholm: University of Stockholm Institute of International Education.
- Lind, A., Askoornool, N., & Heinsohn, N. (2006). Cuba's Global Literacy Approach "Yo, Si Puedo" (Unpublished draft report, provided to authors).
- Lopez, D. G and Herrera, S. H. (2012). Notes on South-South Cooperation and the Democratic Developmental State: Cuba and a New Research Agenda. In D. A. Omoweh (ed.), *The Feasibility of the Democratic Developmental State in the South*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

- Lorenzetto, A., & Neys, K. (1965). *Report on the method and means utilised in Cuba to eliminate illiteracy* Retrieved:  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0008/000874/087420eb.pdf>
- Mackie, R. (ed.). (1980). *Literacy and Revolution : The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*. London: Pluto Press.
- Maddox, B. (2007). What can ethnographic studies tell us about the consequences of literacy?  
*Comparative Education*, 43(2), 253-271.
- Mayo, P. (2013). *Echoes from Freire for a Critically Engaged Pedagogy*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Mlotshwa, S. (2009). Reversing the effects of apartheid. *The Witness*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.witness.co.za>
- Muhr, T. (2013). Optimism reborn. Nicaragua's Participative Education Revolution, the Citizen Power development model and the construction of 21st century socialism. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(2), 276-295.
- Nassif, R. (2000). Jose Marti (1853–95). Retrieved  
[www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/martie.PDF](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/martie.PDF)
- Parra, S. (2009). An experience of cooperation within the educational scope of popular education and literacy. *Rhizome Freirian*, 9(3), 462.

- Pérez Cruz, F. (2007). *Paulo Freire and the Cuban Revolution*. Proceedings of the joint international conference of the Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education.
- Pérez Cruz, F. (n.d). *Paulo Freire and the Cuban Revolution: Reflections on the urgency of praxis* (Unpublished paper. Original in Spanish. Copy provided by the author, Havana May 2010. Translated by Marlene Obeid).
- Remple, C. (2014). The National Literacy Campaign in Cuba. Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, Chicago, May.
- Reyes, E. (2011). *Mission Robinson*. Paper presented at the Cuban Literacy at 50 Forum, held in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney on Friday 15 April 2011. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/debhayessite/MissionRobinsonJune2011.pdf?attredirects=0>
- Street, B. (Ed.). (2001). *Literacy & Development. Ethnographic perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Streck, D. R. (2008). José Martí and popular education: a return to the sources. *Educ. Pesqui.* [online], 34(1): 11-25.
- Torres, R. M. (2009). *From literacy to lifelong learning: Trends, issues and challenges in youth and adult education in Latin America and the*

*Caribbean. Regional synthesis report.* Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

UNESCO (2006). *Study on the Effectiveness and Feasibility of the Literacy Training Method Yo Sí Puedo.* Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001468/146881e.pdf> .

Wagner, S. (2005). *Venezuela: Illiteracy Free Territory* (Internet article, posted 21 April 2005 to [www.Venezuela.com](http://www.Venezuela.com)).

Youngman, F. (1986). *Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy.* London: Croom Helm.