

# Back to the Future?: Timor-Leste, Cuba and the return of the mass literacy campaign

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## Abstract

In December 2005, eleven Cuban educational advisers arrived in Timor-Leste to begin work on a national literacy campaign. Adapting the program known in Latin America as *Yo, Sí Puedo* (Yes I Can), the Cubans trained over 400 local tutors to run classes in every part of the country, using a method they call 'alphanumeric', delivered via audiovisual technology. The campaign was launched in March 2007, and the first classes began in June of that year. By September 2010, three years later, over 70,000 adults, over one fifth of the total illiterate population, had successfully completed a thirteen week basic literacy course. Drawing on original research undertaken in Timor-Leste between 2004 and 2009, followed by further investigations in May 2010 in Havana, Cuba, this paper describes the Timor-Leste campaign, locating it within the historical commitment of the country's independence movement to adult literacy, and the broader context of Cuba's international literacy work.

## Introduction

I enter the field of adult literacy with some trepidation, since I am not an adult literacy specialist. My background, before I became an academic, was in community development and adult education, working mainly with Indigenous organisations. This work made me sensitive to issues of literacy and language, but unlike many who write for this journal, I do not have decades of experience as a literacy teacher or a deep knowledge of the debates. On the other hand, as someone with a strong interest in radical adult education theory and practice, my focus has been on understanding the role of adult education in social change, which has connected me to the tradition of popular education and the work of Paulo Freire. This interest, and my history of activism in the solidarity movement, led me to Timor-Leste in 2004, where a new independent government was grappling with the problems of how to build an education system to suit its needs. In September of that year, I was asked to give a keynote address at the country's first National Adult Literacy Conference on the links between literacy and other

development goals (Boughton and Durnan 2004), drawing on research I have done around similar issues in Aboriginal communities (Boughton 2000, 2009). That Conference passed a resolution calling on the government to mount a national literacy campaign, and in the six years that have passed since then, I have become closely involved with the campaign which eventuated, a campaign which is still underway, supported by a team of literacy educators from Cuba who utilise a model best known by its Spanish name, *Yo, Sí Puedo* (in English, Yes, I Can). The aim of this paper is to share some of the story of the literacy campaign in Timor-Leste with the Australian adult literacy community and its international colleagues.

### **Methodology**

Data on which this paper is based were collected in a variety of ways. The author and a colleague conducted an initial inquiry into the role of adult education in Timor-Leste's post conflict development in 2004, utilising a political economy framework developed by Youngman (2000). This entailed a review of government and donor policy documents, interviews with key stakeholders and an initial mapping of programs, and is described in more detail in another publication (Boughton and Durnan 2007). On the basis of this initial work, a partnership agreement was signed between the author's university and the government of Timor-Leste's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour. This led to an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant for a three year action-research project to work with the two Ministries to collect data and work alongside Timorese nationals to build their capacity to design a national adult education system appropriate to the country's development goals (Boughton and Spence 2009). As part of this project, the Minister of Education invited the author to organise an evaluation of the national literacy campaign as it rolled out, both to provide a second source of advice to that being received from the Cuban mission, and to assist the Timorese leadership working on the campaign to develop their understanding of adult education principles and practices. The method chosen combined participant observation, working full-time alongside Ministry officials and their Cuban advisers in the first six months of 2007 as the campaign was getting underway, with subsequent research team field trips every three months for one to three weeks. These field trips were to review the data being collected by the Cuban mission and the Ministry, to observe classes in progress, and to interview the advisers, the Timorese leadership, international donor staff, and selected campaign participants. The most recent visit was in September 2010. Over the period 2007-2010, several hundred interviews, meetings and observation visits to classes were recorded in fieldwork notebooks, and documents and written reports were collected and catalogued, for cross validation. Follow up interviews with a small sample of campaign students, teachers and local organisers were conducted by

Timorese research associates in two districts in 2009-2010. Information on the earlier 1975-78 campaign was collected through a combination of interviews with surviving participants, secondary sources and archival material. Finally, in May 2010, the author spent three weeks in Havana, Cuba, conducting interviews, meetings and seminars at the Pedagogical Institute for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) with Cuban educationalists who had been involved with the development of the *Yo Si Puedo* method or more generally with Cuba's international education work. The author was also given an unpublished collection of the written reflections of the first group of advisers (Herrera 2008). Additional material was collected from Cuba's Museum of Literacy, which records Cuba's own literacy campaign and its subsequent international literacy work.

### Origins

Next year will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the twentieth century's most famous mass adult literacy campaign. In 1961, the new revolutionary government of Fidel Castro in Cuba mobilised thousands of high school students, teachers and literate urban workers to go into the countryside to teach basic literacy to over 700,000 people (Kozol 1978). The campaign inspired a generation of literacy activists and scholars, influencing among others, Paulo Freire, who not long after began his literacy work in Brazil (Perez Cruz 2007). The Cuban campaign also influenced campaigns in the African countries fighting for independence in the 1970s, including in Angola, in Mozambique, and in Guinéa Bissau, where Freire himself was also involved. The Nicaraguan literacy crusade of 1989 was the last of these campaigns to attract worldwide attention, but campaigns continued to be mounted throughout the 1990s in a variety of postcolonial contexts (Arnové and Graff 1987, Abendroth 2009).

Paulo Freire visited Australia in 1974 (Freire 2007), and many Australian adult educators and literacy professionals became advocates of his emancipatory model of literacy work. But this was the period of the Cold War, and the literacy campaign model which Freire supported, in which the teaching of literacy was located inside mass movements for social and political change, had little chance of gaining traction, as we might say today, in Australian adult education policy. Freirean practitioners and scholars in this country had therefore to content themselves with smaller-scale efforts to embed emancipatory literacy learning theory inside existing literacy and adult basic education programs. Unknown to Australian literacy circles at the time, however, the idea of a literacy campaign had also found its way to the tiny island then known as Portuguese Timor, a few hundred kilometres north west of Darwin. The Australian film, *Balibo*, released last year, tells in graphic detail the story of the illegal Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975. The film does not, however, tell the whole story. As the threat of invasion

mounted in early 1975, the independence party FRETILIN sent teams of high school and university students from Dili, the capital, into those western districts, to run literacy classes designed to conscientise the population to the aims of the independence movement. The students were trained to use a basic literacy manual, called *Timor Is Our Country*, developed the year before by Timorese university students studying in Portugal (which was then the colonial power in East Timor). The manual incorporated some of the ideas of Paulo Freire, which the students had learned from their comrades in the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa, in Guinéa Bissau, Mozambique and Cape Verde (Basurewan 2004). The literacy campaign was reported briefly in the Australian media in the months prior to the invasion, and mentioned in some studies of Timor-Leste's independence struggle (for example, Hill 2002), and a delegation of Australians who visited Timor in early 1975 saw the campaign in action.

Jill Jolliffe, whose book *Balibo* became the basis of the film (Jolliffe 2009), was a member of that delegation, and she brought a copy of the manual back to Australia<sup>1</sup>, to try to raise money through the Australian Union of Students to support the campaign. But within a few months the invading Indonesian army had closed the borders, and no further visits were possible until the late 1980s. Most of the authors of the manual died at the hands of the Indonesian troops, including Rosa Muki Bonaparte, the founder of the Timorese women's organization, OPMT (Popular Organisation of Timorese Women), Vicente Sa'he, Hamis Basurewan, Antonio Carvarino and the poet Borges Da Costa. For over two years, however, the literacy classes continued in the areas in which FRETILIN's armed wing, FALANTIL, still maintained control, until Indonesia's superior firepower forced the majority to come down from the mountains to live in the Indonesian controlled areas, while small guerilla bands continued the armed struggle. Many of the young teachers and their literacy class participants then became the backbone of the clandestine underground resistance which supported the guerillas and continued to campaign for independence (Interview, Ildha da Concecao, Dili, October 2006; Cabral and Martin-Jones 2008).

Inside this clandestine movement, the story of the literacy campaign lived on, inspiring a new generation of young student activists in the 1990s to turn once again to the works of Paulo Freire and the Guinea Bissau leader Amilcar Cabral (Durnan 2005, Da Silva 2009). When Indonesia was finally forced to agree to a United Nations supervised ballot on independence in 1999, and the overwhelming majority of the population chose independence, some of these students formed literacy groups again, and went into the districts as volunteers to re-start the literacy campaign which had been

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<sup>1</sup> A copy survives in the archives of the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

aborted in 1978 (Nicolai 2004). With support from some progressive international NGOs, in particular Oxfam, they continued to advocate for a national literacy campaign, one which they believed would help bring the vast majority of the population which had supported the independence struggle throughout the twenty four year military occupation, into the process of reconstruction and development as active agents. The need for such a campaign was also strongly supported by the new independent FRETILIN government, which took power in 2002, following a period of UN rule. In December 2005, the FRETILIN Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri visited Havana, to re-negotiate Cuba's program of medical assistance to his country (Anderson 2010). In discussions with the Cuban president Fidel Castro, he learned of Cuba's adult literacy work in Latin America, and was offered a team of Cuban literacy advisers to help the FRETILIN government mount a national literacy campaign (Interview, Mari Alkatiri, Dili, January 2010).

### **The Cuban literacy campaign model**

The initial team of advisers which arrived a few weeks later consisted of eleven experienced educators, many with previous international experience. They had all been trained at the Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC), a university established by the Cuban government in 1990 to train teachers from countries in the region and its own extensive but little-known international education missions (Hickling-Hudson 2004). In the late 1990s, IPLAC began to develop a new method for providing mass literacy programs in countries of the South, initially via radio, and then later through audiovisual programs delivered via television or DVD. Initially trialled in Haïti, the method was then deployed to an increasing number of countries in the region, including Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Nicaragua (Interview, Jaime Canfux, Havana, May 2010). While the technology was new, it also built on Cuba's own experience, not just in the campaign of 1961, but in the other countries in which campaigns had been mounted with Cuban assistance in the 1970s and 1980s (Boughton 2008). By December 2005, when Alkatiri visited Cuba, the IPLAC program had been adopted in fifteen countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guinéa Bissau, Haïti, Honduras, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela (Lind et al 2006). The number of countries employing the method has now almost doubled, to twenty-eight (Torres 2009).

The Cuban model, according to its proponents,<sup>2</sup> has a number of distinct elements or features which can be separated analytically, but which are interdependent. The model grows out of Cuba's distinctive view of adult

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<sup>2</sup> This account is based on interviews and seminars at IPLAC in May 2010, and discussions in Timor-Leste with the Cuban adviser team.

literacy and the central place which it plays in building an education system geared to its model of development. Cuban pedagogical theory shares with Freire's writings a deep egalitarian humanism, which the Cubans trace back to the writings of José Martí, a leader of the anti-colonial independence movement which arose in Cuba when it was still a Spanish colony in the late nineteenth century. Like Freire, Martí believed that education was a liberating force, because it was only with the opportunities provided by education that people could realise their full human potential. Unlike, however, the more individualist liberal humanism of western democratic theory, Martí's humanism was social, and included the concept of 'social solidarity', whereby all humanity was seen to have a common fate. The duty of solidarity is inclusive therefore, not just of all the people in the nation, but in other countries of the world. Martí is credited with initiating Cuba's first mass literacy campaign during the independence struggle in the 1890s. His writings were taken up by both Castro and Che Guevara to argue for the centrality of education in the modern Cuban revolution (Holst 2009), and continue to exert a strong influence on Cuban pedagogy.

Another important feature, which grows out of this philosophical position, is the role of political will. For a literacy campaign to succeed, it must have the support of all levels of society, and especially the state, though they have mounted successful campaigns, for example in Nicaragua, in alliance only with civil society organisations. To ensure this political will is present as an active force in the campaign, a series of commissions are established, including a national commission representing key national political leader and national organisations, with sub-commissions at provincial or district level. In Timor-Leste, the FRETILIN government created a National Commission led by the Minister of Education, but including other Ministers, representatives of the Churches, and civil society organisations. In Venezuela, the President headed the national commission. The role of the national commission and the sub-commissions is to generate the support in the population as a whole for the mission of the literacy campaign, which is expressed as the 'eradication' of illiteracy throughout the district, the province and the whole country. In Timor-Leste, this work is referred to as the socialisation phase of the campaign. As the campaign progresses, villages, towns and districts are progressively declared 'free of illiteracy', and graduations and ceremonies are organised by the Commissions to celebrate this achievement.

However, what this means in practice is that people who previously identified as non-literate have completed a very basic introductory course, not that they have acquired literacy in a functional sense. These classes, described in more detail below, form the second phase of the campaign. This initial course is intended to provide a pathway into the third phase of the campaign, which is the establishment of post-literacy activities and courses. These

include more intensive literacy classes, but also other literacy-based activities such as agricultural extension programs, health promotion and human rights education. The Cubans argue that these post-literacy activities should eventually form part of a fully-articulated non-formal adult education system, which can only be developed over a much longer period. The mass literacy campaign thus forms part of a longer process, as it did in Cuba, culminating in the development of an inclusive mass system of education, designed to bring those sections of the population which have in the past benefitted least from formal education into the process of development. Importantly, for the Cubans, authentic development, by which they mean social and cultural development as well as economic development, can only occur on the basis of mass education, because only people who are educated can solve the problems faced by countries which are attempting to break free from colonial and neo-colonial dependency to chart an independent course. For Cuba, having a well-educated population means that the people can solve their own problems, participating actively in the development decisions of their village, their workplace, their neighbourhood and district, and the country as a whole. Education, in other words, is a necessary condition for democratic participation (Quiddington 2009, Interview Nydia Gonzales, Havana, May 2010).

The third distinguishing feature of the Cuban campaign model is the use of a modified distance education model in the initial classes. The introductory course is a set of sixty-five one-hour lessons on DVD/videotape, which students watch under the supervision of locally-recruited village-based 'monitors' over ten to fifteen weeks. The Timor-Leste government bought each suco (local administrative unit) a TV monitor and player, and every location without electricity was provided with a diesel generator and fuel, so that no village would be excluded from the campaign. Each lesson shows on screen a class of adult students (played by actors) being taught literacy by an experienced teacher. Under supervision, the local monitors are able to help their students follow the video teacher's instructions, and, using printed manuals and workbooks, complete oral and written exercises being modelled for them on the screen. The classes are based on what the Cubans describe as an 'analytic-synthetic' pedagogy, in which words and phrases are broken down into component sounds and letters and then re-assembled. To facilitate the learning of the alphabet and the construction of words, each letter is associated with a number. This technique, which is called 'alpha-numeric', is based on an assumption that most non-literate or low literate people have some familiarity with numbers through the operation of markets and local exchange (Interview, Jaime Canfux, IPLAC, Havana May 2010). The method combines this distance education technology with a national system of co-ordination and quality control, allowing the use of relatively untrained local 'monitors', backed up by highly-skilled technical advisers. Importantly, the

method is adapted and modified to suit the local conditions in the country where it is running.

The fourth distinguishing feature of the model is the way the advisers carry out their work. In Timor-Leste, there are now thirty-five Cuban educators. The Coordinator and one other adviser work in the capital, but the rest all live and work in the towns and villages. There they exist on a monthly allowance which is one tenth the norm for international advisers, renting rooms in local houses, shopping locally, and travelling on local transport, either microlets or on the back of the motorbikes allotted to the Timorese district and sub-district campaign coordinators. Living and working as closely as possible to the local monitors and students, they win enormous respect, and it also allows them to tailor their advice and supervision of the classes and monitors to the local circumstances. They also exercise close supervision and control, with every class being visited regularly, to monitor attendance and progress; and they run regular training sessions for the village based monitors to help with lesson preparation and to resolve problems being encountered. An interesting synergy has also developed between the literacy campaign and the Cuban medical aid program. In a significant number of Timor-Leste's 442 local administrative units, called *sucos*, Cuban doctors and their Timorese trainees are visiting the literacy classes to undertake health checks and carry out basic health promotion work. These visits are recorded as part of the central monitoring of the campaign, which takes the form of fortnightly statistical reports on the campaign's progress to the Minister of Education.

### **Los Hau Bele!: Yo, Sí Puedo ! goes local**

Although the Cuban model utilises the same basic approach in each of the countries in which it has been deployed, there is also significant customisation to local conditions, including local languages. The language ecology of Timor-Leste is highly complex, and the subject of much national and international attention and debate (Hajek 2000). The Constitution recognises two official languages, Portuguese and Tetum<sup>3</sup>, and two further 'working languages', Indonesian and English. When they first arrived, the Cubans based their choice of Portuguese on the practical reality that they already had materials developed in this language for Brazil, and until the program was underway, they had no guarantee that it would actually succeed in gaining the official and community support required for a successful national campaign. Given the high cost of producing a program in another

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<sup>3</sup> Tetum refers to Dili Tetum, a lingua franca based on one of the sixteen local Indigenous languages; it incorporates a significant number of Portuguese borrowings.

language, and the lack of facilities and educators in Timor-Leste to assist with this work, the decision made good sense.

As the pilot phase progressed during 2006, the Cuban advisers became more aware of the challenges of teaching in Portuguese. Not only was it not the people's first language, but also, during the period of Indonesian occupation, Portuguese was brutally repressed, because it was the language of the resistance. This had left insufficient people in the local villages and towns able to speak and write it with enough proficiency to work as monitors. It should be added, however, that a similar problem existed in relation to Tetum in districts where it is not the first language and/ or is not widely spoken. The Cuban advisers adopted a two-stage strategy to deal with this challenge. Firstly, they produced local manuals which included Tetum translations of most of the Portuguese language words used in the DVDs and exercise books, and they used the training sessions for monitors and co-ordinators to develop their Portuguese language skills. However, they also set about producing a Tetum version of *Yo, Si Puedo!*, once they had confirmed that the required political support existed across the political leadership in Timor-Leste to ensure the campaign would continue beyond the first year.

The process to produce the materials in Tetum was both complex and ingenious. Firstly, Rafael Orteja, the deputy co-ordinator, utilised a Cuban doctor with some film experience to shoot footage around Dili and the districts which could be incorporated into the new program. He then recruited a multi-lingual Timorese woman to travel to Cuba, where she worked with the IPLAC staff to translate the basic script for the DVD and exercise books and manuals. Finally, still in Cuba, Timorese medical students who were studying in Havana were recruited to be the actors in the new Tetum version of the classes on the DVDs. The new set of master tapes, in Tetum, was then flown back to Timor-Leste, where the Ministry of Education arranged for their duplication and distribution, along with the printing of new exercise books and manuals. The arrival of the Tetum DVDs and materials coincided with the start of the new adviser mission, and both events gave new impetus to the campaign which some months before had begun to flag.

This loss of momentum had resulted from the change of government in July 2007, which was followed by a period of re-organisation and restructuring of the Ministry of Education, and a shift of priorities away from the national literacy campaign. The new Minister, Dr Joao Cancio Freitas, closed down the National Commission and Campaign Secretariat, returning overall leadership of the campaign to officials in his Ministry. By April 2008, the number of *sucos* with active classes had shrunk from a high in December 2007 of over two hundred down to a mere thirty. At that stage it appeared that some of the forces which had opposed the literacy campaign would prevail, as the political leadership of the new government seemed to lack the commitment which FRETILIN had shown to this work (Boughton 2008).

However, despite the strength of the historic ties between FRETILIN and Cuba, the Cubans, following another principle of their model, maintained a strictly neutral stance in relation to Timor-Leste's internal politics. In January 2009, the Minister made his second visit to Cuba, to attend the Pedagogy Congress in Havana, where he publicly acknowledged the Cuban team's work. He has since agreed to pilot a more intensive phase of the campaign, opening classes in every village on the island of Atauro, and in the district of Oecusse, in an effort to accelerate the achievement of the campaign's goals as part of his country's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals.

By September 2010, classes were running in over 400 *sucos*, and the numbers of people who had successfully completed the basic introductory classes had reached 73,600, according to the Cubans' most recent report to the Ministry. The country, it seems, is now well on the way to achieving its goal of eliminating illiteracy by 2015. This is a remarkable achievement. At the 2004 Census, over 250,000 people aged fifteen and over had identified as illiterate, nearly 50 per cent of the country's adult population. In the more remote regions, and especially among women, it was as high as 80 per cent. Moreover, the campaign had survived a period of great political and social turbulence, coming on top of the twenty-four year military occupation of its giant neighbour, Indonesia, which had caused the loss of up to 200,000 lives (Boughton 2008).

### **The politics of literacy**

The non-political character of the *Yo, Sí Puedo* model and materials has caused some Latin American educators to question its relationship to Freirean popular education. Concerns have also been raised in relation to the basic teaching method, which depends very much on the students and monitors closely following the TV classes and their manuals and exercise books, and is therefore less participatory and dialogic than most people would expect in a Freirean campaign. Three leading Cuban educators, Nydia Gonzales, Jaime Canfux and Felipe Perez Cruz<sup>4</sup> discussed these criticisms in interviews in Havana earlier this year. Perez Cruz pointed out that Freire endorsed the use of manuals in Angola, Mozambique, Guinéa Bissau and Nicaragua, despite his criticism of them in his own writing. All three argued that in most countries where illiteracy is a major problem it is simply not possible to provide enough trained literacy teachers to utilise a more participatory and transformative methodology. *Yo, Sí Puedo*, alone among

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<sup>4</sup> Gonzales is the founder of the Graciela Butillos Centre for Educational Research, and a leading member of the Association of Cuban Pedagogues. Canfux, a Professor at IPLAC, is one of the architects of the *Yo Si Puedo* method. Both are veterans of the 1961 campaign. Perez is an educational historian, and author of a book on Cuba's literacy work.

the many models of literacy provision around the world, has nevertheless proven itself a low-cost method of reaching very large numbers of people in a fairly short period of time.

They also argued that the highly-politicised campaigning which was possible in earlier periods is not appropriate in countries which do not have the same radical political traditions, and that unless a way can be found to bring non-literate people into the education system, then there is no hope of any progressive political change occurring. Each of them also emphasised that this was a question of humanism, in the Freirean sense, in that the key thing was to ensure that those who would otherwise be excluded were given an opportunity to enter the development process on their own terms. The Cubans' confidence that their actions in promoting mass literacy speak for themselves are echoed by other commentators.

[The] extraordinary generosity and commitment of thousands of Cuban internationalists providing medical and other services in conditions few others would accept is living testimony to the reality of the country's socialist project (Raby 2009:para 41).

The internationalist ethic of the Cuban education and medical missions, and the deep respect with which they treat the most disadvantaged among the local population, is a powerful lesson about the values promoted within their own society through its development model. Our research team's observations of the campaign in many different districts and villages in Timor-Leste confirmed that the day-to-day relationships which have developed between the Cuban advisers and the monitors and literacy class participants are having an emancipatory and empowering effect. One of the clearest indications of this is the way literacy class participants are very vocal when members of our evaluation team visit their classes, not only about issues in relation to the classes themselves, such as problems with equipment and resources, but also on other issues, such as the local rice distribution processes.

Nevertheless, it is of serious concern that the new Minister of Education in Timor-Leste has decided to dispense with the structure which the previous government established. While some subcommissions continue to operate at district and subdistrict levels, and the Cuban advisers and Cuban ambassador still have direct access to the Minister, officials in the Education Ministry have neither the authority nor the organizational culture necessary to lead the social mobilisation demanded in the campaign. The national commission also helped to ensure Timorese ownership and control of the campaign. Most importantly, it was helping to build and maintain the political will which has been the hallmark of every successful literacy campaign for the last sixty years:

The success or failure of a literacy activity does not ultimately derive from economic or technical issues, but rather from the existence or not of a firm political will with the capacity to organize and mobilize the people around a literacy project (Maria Torres, ex-Education Minister, Ecuador, quoted Lind 1988:21).

The lack of any literate culture in many of the smaller rural communities is another major impediment to the eradication of illiteracy, and underlines the need for a fully-developed follow-up post-literacy stage following completion of the Cuban designed initial literacy classes. It is of serious concern that there are no post-literacy activities or classes being organised in any coordinated way for graduates, either by government or by civil society organizations, although some post-literacy classes are now being piloted in some districts. Without a well-developed system of post-literacy activities, the international evidence demonstrates that most of the 'neo-literates' will 'fall back' into illiteracy within 6- 12 months, putting all the gains made to date at risk (Lind 2008). The most urgent priority therefore is to establish a subcommission to coordinate the planning and delivery of post-literacy activities to the 'neo-literates'. This should involve NGOs which are already working on literacy issues, as well as other ministries such as agriculture and health where there is a clear link between literacy and their own programs.

The campaign to eradicate adult illiteracy in Timor-Leste is seen by the government and the Cuban advisers as an essential element in building genuine national unity and an effective participatory democracy, one in which the whole population is actively engaged in driving the process of development. Given the country's low level of adult literacy, the formal education system on its own is unlikely to achieve this outcome. Unless adult illiteracy is significantly reduced, and preferably eradicated, over the next decade, Timor-Leste will follow the pattern of many other countries of the South, developing into a more unequal society where the majority of the people are excluded from their rightful share in the benefits of the independence they fought so hard to achieve.

## **Conclusion**

In the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that mass adult literacy campaigns led by governments, often with a revolutionary or decolonising agenda, were making significant inroads into the illiteracy rates in the countries where they were held (Bhola 1984, Arnove and Graff 1987). For a number of reasons, chiefly ideological and political, the mass campaign approach fell into disrepute in the 1990s. The international community, under the influence of the World Bank, shifted the focus of policy and

funding onto basic school education, in the mistaken belief that this would eventually reduce population illiteracy levels as new generations with more schooling replaced those without it (Lind 2008). The abandonment of the mass campaign approach was reinforced when new developments in literacy scholarship, referred to collectively as the ‘new literacy’ studies, helped to problematise a number of features of these campaigns, including their so-called ‘autonomous’ concept of literacy, their use of phonemic teaching strategies, and what the new literacies’ leading exponent Brian Street has called their hegemonic centralising tendencies (Street 2001). Ironically, however, the main target of the new literacies scholarship was not in fact the mass campaign, but rather the human capital driven theories of neoliberalism, in which literacy was pronounced essential to economic development.

In July 2009, Aicha Basurewan, who was a student volunteer in the first FRETILIN-led literacy campaign in 1975, reflected on those experiences in a panel discussion on popular education at the Timor-Leste Studies Conference in Dili:

Any revolutionary process can succeed when it involves everyone. How can people participate in the revolutionary struggle against colonialism if they don’t read and write and don’t know how to analyse colonialists’ actions against them? ... It was not just a matter of teaching them to read and write but also to make them to change and stand up for themselves and to fight for our country’s independence ... Young students (men and women) volunteered themselves and they really wanted to pass their knowledge to the others. They had received guidelines from comrades like Sa’he, Hata and Mau Lear. Paulo Freire’s method was used. The *alfabetizador* was not a teacher but he too was a student because he was also learning from his/her students.

(Translated from the Tetum transcript)

These comments are echoed in the testimonies of other Timorese who survived this period, as they are also among Cubans who participated in the 1961 campaign (Abendroth 2009), and participants in Nicaragua’s campaign in 1979 (Arnove 1986). In every campaign, those who played a role as teachers or educators acknowledge how much they learned from doing this. Certainly, in Timor-Leste, the survivors of that campaign became the leaders of the next generation of the independence movement.

Cuban pedagogical theory provides a powerful explanatory tool here. Drawing on the strong influence of Marxist theory in their intellectual training, Cuban education theorists characterise the problem of mass illiteracy in terms of a historically-determined dialectical contradiction between those who are literate, because they have received an education, and those who are

illiterate, because they have not. This contradiction, they argue, which arises from past patterns of inequality, plays a fundamental role in either the perpetuation of that inequality or in overcoming it. In order to build a more equal society, there has to be, not just a theory of liberation, but a liberatory practice, a practice which bridges that contradiction, allowing teachers and learners to work together on a mass scale to produce something different, a more equal society. How that is to be done can only be decided on the basis of the real existing conditions of the society concerned, and each society will need to approach the problem in the way which suits its conditions. By the same token, an ethic and a practice of internationalism allows different societies to learn from each other, as they too sit at different points in the world-wide contradiction between those who have received the benefit of schooling and the 800 million people who lack basic literacy.

Of course, we should be under no illusion that literacy is a panacea, and that it will produce a more just and equal society on its own. Clearly, a literacy campaign such as the one occurring today in Timor-Leste must be accompanied by a raft of other progressive social policies. However, the impact of the campaign, not just on the newly-literate, but also on the teachers, organisers and community leaders who are part of the campaign, is an important part of the process of creating an environment in which such policies can emerge and gain mass support. Further research is needed to establish the long-term impact, perhaps on the model of follow-up work done on the Nicaraguan literacy campaign (Lankshear et al 1995). However, what is beyond doubt is that the possibility of undertaking such research rests upon the material reality that there are now, as a result of the alliance between the governments of Timor-Leste and Cuba, over 70,000 people who have newly acquired basic literacy, as first defined by UNESCO (Lind 2008:42), that is, they can read and write a simple statement about their own life, in one of the country's two official languages.

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