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# Our homeland is humanity: The Cuban School of Literacy and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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*The ideas of the Cuban 'School of Literacy' are much less well-known in the west than Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This paper is an exploration of the theoretical and practical links between these two historic examples of popular education. The analysis is informed by our direct experience working and undertaking participatory action research alongside Cuban literacy specialists on adult literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia. These campaigns utilised a model known internationally by its Spanish name, Yo, Sí Puedo (Eng: Yes, I Can!). We also include material from interviews in Cuba with leading literacy academics and practitioners.*

***Key words:*** *Paulo Freire, popular education, adult literacy campaigns, Cuba, Yo, Sí Puedo, Timor-Leste, First Nations education*

Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of the publication in English of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This year, 2021, marks the sixtieth anniversary of an equally significant landmark in the history of Latin American popular education, the Cuban national

literacy campaign of 1961 (Kozol 1978). In this paper, we explore some theoretical and practical links between these two events, by reflecting on our experiences working and researching in two recent adult literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia, both of which utilised the Yo, Sí Puedo (Eng: Yes, I Can!) campaign model developed by the Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) in Cuba. Over a sixteen-year period, from the initial planning of the Timor national literacy campaign in 2004-5, through to its completion in 2012; and in Australia from 2011 to 2020, we worked with Cuban literacy specialists on the design, delivery and evaluation of these campaigns. Bob was the chief investigator on two Australian Research Council projects, evaluating the conduct and impact of these campaigns. Deborah worked as a research associate on the study in Timor-Leste, and as campaign coordinator on the Australian campaign. Over the same period, we twice visited Cuba, to learn more about the 'Cuban School of Literacy' from adult literacy academics at IPLAC in Havana. In this paper, we invite readers to consider the extent to which these two campaigns, in theory, and in practice, constitute a contemporary Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

## Timor-Leste's National Literacy Campaign 2004-2012

Our involvement with both Timor-Leste and Paulo Freire began in 1974. In that year the Carnation Revolution in Portugal ended decades of fascist rule, initiating a process of decolonisation in Portugal's overseas territories, including what was then known as Portuguese Timor. Paulo Freire was visiting Australia when news of the revolution arrived (Freire 2006, p.156-8). From here, he went directly to meet with leaders of the national liberation movements of Guinea-Bissau and Angola, to begin his collaboration with them on mass literacy campaigns. Coincidentally, his ideas were simultaneously heading in the opposite direction, with a group of university students returning to Timor from Portugal, where they had learned of his work from their radical anti-colonial comrades in Lisbon. They brought with them a literacy manual, *Timor is Our Country,* written in a local language, Tetum. They then trained other students to go with them into the countryside, to mount a literacy campaign aimed at building support for the anti-colonial independence party, the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of Timor-Leste (FRETILIN). But within months, the Indonesian government began a destabilisation campaign to prevent a 'little Cuba' from emerging in the region, culminating in a

full-scale military invasion in November 1975. The students who had begun the literacy campaign retreated with much of the population into the mountains where they continued their popular education work, in 'bases' controlled by the resistance army, FALANTIL. Eventually, many were captured and killed, but their ideas, and the ideas of Freire, lived on among the armed resistance and the underground (Da Silva 2011).

From 1975 until the final defeat and withdrawal of the Indonesian army in 1999, we worked alongside Timorese refugees in Australia in solidarity with FRETILIN, which, in 2002, became the first post-independence government. In 2004, we took part in a National Literacy Conference organised by a partnership between the Ministry of Education, Oxfam and Dai Popular, a popular education movement established by university students from the Resistance (Boughton & Durnan 2004). At that Conference, the FRETILIN Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, committed to the establishment of a new national literacy campaign. The next year, when Alkatiri was in Havana to renegotiate the Cuban health assistance program, the Cuban President Fidel Castro offered to send a team of IPLAC advisers to begin work on a campaign. The first eleven advisers arrived a few weeks later (Pers. comm., Mari Alkatiri, January 2010).

The Coordinator of the adviser team was José Manuel 'Llera' García, a senior official from the Cuban Ministry of Education, who had participated in the 1961 campaign as a high school 'brigadista'. Llera spoke Portuguese, having fought in Angola in the 1970s in the international military force which Cuba sent to assist the independence movement to repel an invasion from apartheid South Africa. The Deputy Coordinator, Rafael Ferrer Ortega, also a Portuguese speaker, had previously worked on literacy campaigns in Angola, Haití, México, and Venezuela. Llera and the Cuban ambassador, Ramon Vasquez managed the administration, budget and relationships with the Timorese Ministry of Education, while Ferrer led the contextualisation and piloting of the campaign during 2006, the professional development of the Cuban team, and the training of all the local staff (Pers. comms. Garcia, Ferrer, and Vasquez, Timor-Leste 2006-07; Herrera 2008). From 2006 until 2012, we worked alongside the Cuban adviser team and the Timorese staff in the Campaign Secretariat on the planning, preparation, delivery and evaluation of the campaign, spending varying periods in Timor-Leste. The action-research component of this work was part-funded under the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Program.

The first class opened in Dili in June 2007, with a ceremony presided over by the newly-elected President Jose Ramos Horta and the FRETILIN Prime Minister, Estanislau Da Silva. A further four hundred similar classes opened over the following months, reaching almost every village across this tiny nation. Over the next five years, the Cubans expanded their adviser mission to 35, as some returned to Cuba and others arrived to replace them. By 2012, over 200,000 people had completed the YSP classes, and every one of Timor-Leste's thirteen districts had been declared 'free of illiteracy' (Boughton 2010; 2012).

The declaration of villages and districts as 'free of illiteracy' ('Livre de analfabetismo' in the official language, Portuguese), which was endorsed by the Timor-Leste Ministry of Education, raised concerns among some international education specialists working in the country. The same practice has been criticised by some Latin American literacy specialists who have written about the Yo, Sí Puedo campaigns in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia. As readers of AJAL know, contemporary literacy scholarship considers literacy not to be a discrete skill, which you either have or do not have, but a social practice existing on a continuum, from minimal to highly developed and specific to context. What 'free of illiteracy' meant to the Cuban literacy specialists and their Timorese counterparts, who were well-aware of this debate, was that over 95% of the people in the village or district who originally identified as needing literacy instruction had successfully completed the *Yo, Sí Puedo* lessons and could write their name, comprehend simple texts and compose a simple personal sentence or two in one of the official languages (Tetum or Portuguese). They had thus reached the first stage on a much longer journey, through a phase of post-literacy and on, towards the literacy practices achieved through basic education. In the campaign tradition, this way of measuring and celebrating individual and collective success at this first stage has historically played an important political role in maintaining the momentum and 'fervour' of the campaign activists, including in the 1961 Cuban campaign and the many which followed it (Bhola 1984).

## YSP in Aboriginal Australia 2009-2020

In 2009, we reported our findings on the YSP campaign model in Timor-Leste to a roundtable of Aboriginal education and health leaders in Alice Spring (Boughton 2009). This meeting established an Aboriginal Steering Committee to design a similar campaign in

Aboriginal communities in Australia, to be led by Ngemba man, Jack Beetson, previously the President of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (Beetson 1997). In 2010, we spent two weeks in Cuba, meeting with IPLAC and other leaders of Cuba's popular education community. In 2011, with funding from the Australian government's Workplace English Language Literacy Strategic Results Program (WELL SRP), work began to prepare for a campaign in the western NSW town of Wilcannia, in partnership with the Local Aboriginal Land Council. The first Cuban adviser, Jose 'Chala' Leblanch, arrived in February 2012, and the campaign was launched a short time later (Boughton et al 2013). After two successful intakes, funding was secured to extend it to two more communities in the region, in Bourke and Enngonia, and a new national Aboriginal organisation, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) was established to develop a national campaign. Since then, the campaign has run over a dozen more intakes in communities, in western NSW, in Campbelltown in Sydney, and in Ltentye Apurte, Central Australia. In that time, two more Cuban educators, Lucy Nunez Peraz and Felix Hernandez Diaz, have undertaken missions in Australia. Currently, campaigns are running in Ltyentye Apurte and Tennant Creek, NT, in Yarrabah, Queensland and Bourke, NSW. At the time of writing, 258 First Nations students had successfully completed the campaign.

From 2012 until 2020, we worked alongside the Cuban advisers with LFLF and locally-recruited First Nations staff to develop and adapt the YSP model to the particular circumstances of the communities in which it ran. Deborah was initially the Australian campaign coordinator, and later LFLF's education and training manager. Bob coordinated the ongoing longitudinal evaluation of the campaign process, outcomes and impacts, utilising participatory action research methodology, part-funded by a second ARC Linkage grant.

## The Cuban School of Literacy

The *Yo, Sí Puedo* campaign model is a product of what one of its originators, Dr Jaime Canfux, refers to as the Cuban School of Literacy. Canfux, a veteran of the 1961 literacy campaign, told us that Cuba's revolutionary approach to adult literacy began in 1959, when Che Guevara and other leaders opened the second armed front in the Sierra Maestra, during the campaign to overthrow the United States-backed

Batista regime. Up to 90% of the soldiers they recruited had little or no literacy, and classes began with them. In the areas they liberated, the Cuban revolutionaries opened primary schools and continued adult education classes, staffed by university student volunteers like himself. When the national literacy campaign was launched, he began teaching literacy, and then became a campaign coordinator in Oriente Province, responsible for 19 other teachers, 157 "brigadistas" and 750 people with little or no literacy. The brigadistas were high school students, 10000 of whom joined the campaign. Each teacher looked after a group of brigadistas. But there were also local volunteers, called "popular literacy teachers", who stayed in their own districts and taught there. The 'professional teachers' met every 15 days to review progress. In an interview for a US study, Canfux recalled his time in that campaign:

> *The importance was given to forming consciousness to prepare the men (sic) who would later have the destiny of Cuba in their hands. And above all the moral values because this country was very corrupt. Honesty, solidarity, comradeship. That's how it started, and in many liberated areas there were primary school teachers.... This is the way it happened. It was natural and spontaneous. The ideology came from the revolution at that moment. There was no other pedagogical line (Canfux, n.d.).*

Freire had already begun his work in Brazil and in Chile and had met with Raul Ferrer, one of the architects of the 1961 campaign in 1965. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, written around that time, he makes several references to Cuba, to Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in particular (Freire 1972, pp 62, 98, 131, 133, 138). But his work did not become well known in Cuba until much later. That said, Canfux believes they shared a common approach:

> *Afterwards, much later, Paolo Freire called it the psycho-social method. And he said something that is very true. That is that before you read the text you have to read the context. But we had done this before! Because life imposed that on us! And afterwards Paolo didn't conceive of a national campaign for literacy. Of course, he didn't have the necessity that we had. He was working in communities in reading circles. Yet we coincided in many respects (ibid).*

Canfux eventually rose to be a Vice Minister in charge of Adult Education within the Ministry of Education. He completed a PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, and his thesis, "Politics and strategies used in the National Literacy Campaign of 1961 in Cuba" was the first systematic study done in Cuba on the campaign. After moving into the academy, he established the Chair of Adult Literacy at IPLAC, located within the Enrique Varona Pedagogical University in Havana. He ran IPLAC's adult education doctoral program and was responsible for training Cuban advisers to take part in international literacy missions. In 2000, he began developing the YSP model with Dr Leonela Relys Díaz who had joined the Cuban campaign as a 'brigadista' when she was 14 years old. Subsequently trained as a teacher, Relys led the development of the radio literacy program in Haiti, then worked on its adaptation for television, in Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Brazil. (Perez Cruz n.d.; Canfux Gutiérrez et al 2004; Pers.comms, Canfux, Havana May 2010)

Rafael Ferrer, who led the pedagogical work in the Timor-Leste campaign, was one of Canfux's doctoral students and lived with him in Havana when he was completing his PhD. In 2006-07, it was Ferrer's training sessions, and those run by other mission advisers, that first exposed us to the philosophy and literacy teaching method of the YSP model. Later, at IPLAC in 2010, Canfux and other IPLAC staff provided more detailed presentations on the model. We returned to Havana briefly in 2013, to take part in an international Conference, Pedagogia 2013, as part of a panel on Yo, Sí Puedo campaigns with Canfux and other educators from literacy missions in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia. At meetings with IPLAC, arrangements were negotiated to continue the Australian campaign.

In Timor-Leste, we learned the practicalities of the YSP model, including the national and local structures that are built to 'socialise' and mobilise the support of the population; the contextual research and piloting that is done before the campaign is fully developed; the logistics of equipping classrooms; the recruitment and preparation of local staff; the sequencing and conduct of the lessons using the DVDs and the exercise books; the records that need to be kept to monitor progress; and the types of activities which are developed for the post-literacy phase. We also learned the basic structure of each DVD lesson, which is based on an 'algorithm' repeated in every lesson, including the discussion of a

'positive message', a Cuban adaptation of the Freirian idea of thematic coding; and the importance of the 'action-reflection' process in every element of the campaign. In the sessions at IPLAC, we gained a deeper understanding of the Cubans' philosophy and theory behind the way the campaign unfolds. That said, it is only now, after spending many more years working in the campaigns in Australia, that we have fully understood how the Cuban model and the ideas of Freire coincide.

## Global 'Illiteracy' and the 'dehumanisation' of imperialism

The first and perhaps most important learning is that the Cubans identify the social and economic inequality produced by an imperialist world system as the root cause of the problem of mass illiteracy on a global scale, especially its colonialist and neo-colonialist aspects. That is to say, illiteracy in the Global South is one side of a contradiction, the other side of which is the high level of education in the west. Both are products of the same global economic system. In words which echo the arguments of Freire, they say that overcoming this division of humanity into the more literate and the less literate undermines the humanity of us all; and that a fully human society on a global scale will only become possible when this contradiction has been resolved so that everyone can participate equally in the process of building a better world. Their 1961 campaign, and the international literacy missions they have continued since then, are directed to this end, the resolution of a globally-produced dialectical contradiction. Their inspiration is expressed in the words of a Cuban revolutionary leader from the nineteenth century, Jose Marti: "Our homeland is humanity."

Applying this to the campaigns in which we worked, it is no accident that 50% of the adult populations of Timor-Leste and of First Nations in Australia have not gained basic literacy in the official languages of their countries. Rather, it is a direct, predictable result of the colonial education systems which the imperial powers – Portugal and Indonesia in the case of Timor-Leste, Great Britain and, later, the States and Commonwealth of Australia – built and maintained in the lands they invaded and occupied. This history is alive in the present, in the experiences and the consciousness of the people who lived under those systems. In Timor-Leste, they have now achieved formal independence, but the legacy of hundreds of years of colonial oppression does not thereby simply disappear. As the students of Dai Popular told us, "We

have freed the land. Now we must free the people."

Likewise, in First Nations communities in Australia, peoples' attitudes and expectations regarding settler-colonial education have been built up over generations, since the first proclamation of the imperial governor Lachlan Macquarie offered education to the children of those who would surrender at the same time as he authorised settlers to murder any who did not. For the next two centuries, at different times and in different places, First Nations peoples variously experienced total exclusion from schooling, institutionalised neglect and abuse via mission and settlement schools staffed by unqualified white teachers, and the kidnapping of children to take them away to be educated. Moreover, this 'education' was intimately connected with other equally oppressive aspects of the colonial settler states' approach to the country's original owners, such as forced relocations, mass incarcerations and extreme labour exploitation. It is less than fifty years since the last exclusionary policies were abandoned, and First Nations leaders invited to contribute to the state's education policy for their children and young people. Still today, much of what is taught to First Nations children and young people ignores or denies the reality of invasion and colonisation and the real causes of the economic and social marginalisation and exploitation of their families and communities (Ratcliffe & Boughton 2019).

*Yo, Sí Puedo,* growing as it has from the experiences of generations of resistance to similar forms of oppression, both in pre-revolutionary Cuba, but also in the ex-Portuguese colonies in Africa and the liberation movements of Grenada, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Venezuela, offers a different model of education. Its conscious aim is to support those who participate, as students, teachers and community leaders, to join in a process of south-south cooperation, and to begin to build a decolonising form of education, an education for liberation which the people themselves control (Boughton & Durnan 2014a). Compare Freire, for whom:

> *the pedagogy of the oppressed.... must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation (Freire 1972, p.25).*

*Yo, Sí Puedo* is not a charitable act of benevolence, but rather the first stage of a very long process by which people can themselves build the organisation and understanding they need to transform the conditions which led to their illiteracy.

## The key role of structure, organisation and training

The second thing we have learned is that a mass literacy campaign only succeeds through a highly structured, disciplined and coordinated process. To mount a campaign, it is necessary to build over time alternative educational structures and practices which do not replicate the educational spaces created by the colonial system. An alternative structure is necessary because it is only from within a different structure that we can all learn to think differently and learn how not to reproduce the same contradictions between the more educated and less educated that we are seeking to overcome. The fundamental feature of this alternative structure is that it should socialise and mobilise the people who have lived under the oppressive conditions created by colonialism, so they see the possibility of something different and experience their own power to take control of their own education. However, this does not occur spontaneously, through the more powerful and better educated professionals and experts simply stepping away, so the people 'just do it'. Rather, it emerges over time, from within a structure, the design of which is the product of the Cubans' own long experience and substantial expertise.

In Timor-Leste, Ferrer spent several months teaching our Timorese colleagues how to build the structure required for the campaign. The first task was to establish a National Literacy Commission, representing a range of government agencies, not just the Ministry of Education; and also, the popular 'civil society' organisations. The Commission structure was then replicated at the district and subdistrict level, and in each suco (Timor-Leste's equivalent of a local government area) where the campaign would run. Each district and subdistrict commission identified a coordinator, who then worked with the suco structures and their Cuban advisers to survey their communities to discuss with the people the specific local circumstances, to identify the people with little or no literacy who should be encouraged to join the classes, to select local facilitators, and to mobilise the local population to support the campaign. The coordinators were responsible, once lessons began,

for ensuring that the local facilitators recorded attendance at each lesson, and the progress of each student on a weekly basis, identifying any students who needed additional support. The facilitators and coordinators spent three weeks in workshops with the Cuban advisers, learning the basics of lesson preparation and delivery using the YSP DVDs. On a regular basis, the facilitators from several sucos came to a central location for additional training as a group, led by one or two Cuban advisers. The Cuban team leaders also made regular visits to the districts from Dili, to review progress, and to support and provide additional training to their own adviser teams. Each week, the Cuban advisers and Timorese campaign coordinators submitted reports on each individuals' progress in each class. The data was entered into a database in the Secretariat in Dili, where weekly meetings were held to review progress and identify problems. In summary, the campaign was highly organised and coordinated, with a cascading system of training, supervision and accountability operating between the centre and the local classes.

In Australia, while some Commonwealth government agencies have been prepared to fund campaigns in specific localities, as have agencies in two of the eight state and territory governments, government support has been insufficient to allow for the model to be developed at a region-wide, state-wide or national level. The national-level organisation remains the Aboriginal-controlled NGO which initiated the campaign, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), which works in partnership with local Indigenous organisations to develop the campaign in each community. However, LFLF still follows the Cuban model, by establishing a local 'commission', which LFLF calls a Campaign Working Group (CWG). This includes local community leaders and other indigenous organisations and sometimes government service agencies. This local CWG assists LFLF's staff and the Cuban adviser to select local staff, a coordinator and usually two facilitators, one male and one female. They also help with mobilising support across the community and with identifying potential students. The local coordinators and facilitators are expected to report back to the CWG on a regular basis and to seek their help to adapt the campaign to the local conditions and to solve any problems that arise with student participation and progress. As in Timor- Leste, the first phase of the campaign includes a household survey, in which local people trained for this purpose visit

every household to discuss the campaign and to find out who might want to participate, while also collecting some 'baseline' data from which to assess the overall level of need and interest. This survey is designed to prompt an open-ended dialogue with each household about the issue of English literacy and how it is used in people's lives, information which the local staff then use with the Cuban adviser to help contextualise the teaching to local conditions.

## Contextualisation and local control

The third thing we learned is that alongside the elaboration of the structure of the campaign, the pedagogical practices and the teaching materials must be contextualised to the specific situation in which they are being deployed, nationally and locally. The Cuban campaign model initially comes to a community with a set of 'ready-made' resources. These include the DVD lessons, the student workbooks, and handbooks for coordinators, facilitators and advisers. For those who read Freire primarily as a guide to pedagogical theory and philosophy, it may seem that this is over-determined and top-down, reducing the autonomy of local staff and students to determine the way they will learn.

In our experience, this is not the case. In fact, in a community where over 50% have minimal literacy in an 'official' language, the task of organising and managing a campaign to overcome this would be unthinkable, without a significant input of experience and professional expertise from outside. The Cubans provide this both in the form of the advisers and also in the materials they bring with them. However, as we have described, once the local structures are in place and local staff are recruited, there is an opportunity to adapt these to the local circumstances, in the work which the Cubans call contextualisation. The national and local structures are part of the means by which this is done, since they bring people from the 'host' country or community into dialogue with the Cubans, helping them learn about the context, from which they can then adjust their practice to better suit the local conditions and the peoples' experience. In Timor-Leste, Ferrer opened pilot classes in two communities during the preparation phase. On the basis of this experience, he developed a new facilitators manual which provided locally specific instruction for each of the pre-prepared lessons, so the facilitators could introduce local words and concepts into the lessons. In Australia, a set of lesson plans was prepared for each DVD

lesson and 'templates' for specific campaign activities. A new Australian campaign handbook has now been developed.

Once classes start, and as both local staff and students slowly become more confident in the process, they take more control, making the meanings that are most relevant to their lives. This process, both within the literacy class and in the ongoing in-service training of the local coordinator and facilitators, is achieved through critical self-reflection, in which the Cuban advisers and their local counterparts are expected to participate. Gradually, the learning which is occurring in the campaign becomes the subject of reflection, as the students reflect on what they are learning, the facilitators and coordinators on what they are learning, and the advisers and professionals the same. Collectively, all the campaign participants are building new understanding, based on the experiences of being engaged in this process. People are discovering things about how to change both themselves and the world in which they live. This is similar to the process which Freire describes as moving from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness (Freire 1972, p.101).

Another critical aspect of the DVD lessons is that each one is designed as part of a sequence, through which the actual skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing develop, slowly at first, allowing even the most hesitant learner to progress at their own pace until sufficient building blocks are gained to start constructing simple sentences. Canfux described this to us as an 'analytic-synthetic' process, since sentences and words are broken down into their components and re-assembled in every lesson, each one adding an additional letter or phoneme, which students memorise using a letter-number association system. There is a clear and predictable structure to each individual lesson, following what the Cubans call an 'algorithm.' Because the people chosen as local coordinators and facilitators are almost always people whose literacy proficiency is not much higher than their students, this systematic lesson design and predictability enables them, in a short time, to take leadership of the lesson without assistance from the professional adviser during delivery.

In Australia, we discovered that this was a major strength of the YSP model, that it enabled people who are not highly literate to be 'front-line' teachers in the classroom, and the people responsible for the community organising work which the campaign requires. Local community teachers

help students feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, especially when they are being asked to take risks. Many people have a palpable fear of learning, just as Freire describes it in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which they have to overcome, a fear of being disrespected, and made to feel stupid and unable to learn. Local facilitators know the students personally, they know their families, and they recognise this fear and shame because they have witnessed it and maybe felt it themselves. The students also know them and know that they can trust them. Moreover, the students are proud to see their own family, their own 'mob' playing these roles, leading the campaign, rather than, as with virtually every other institutionalised learning environment they have experienced, non-Indigenous people have been the teachers and the leaders. This is what we mean by saying the campaign decolonises learning. It disrupts the colonial model of learning and education, putting the community in charge. Moreover, because this is a novel experience, something that people have not seen in these remote towns previously, there is an excitement and an enthusiasm, especially as the lessons progress and people become more confident to behave freely, without fearing the consequences of being themselves. As Freire says, this is education as the practice of freedom.

The local staff also ensure not only that the classroom is a safe place, a place of freedom, but also that it is a place of solidarity, love and compassion. We see this in the way staff assist students, not only to complete the exercises and to take part in discussions but in helping them with a thousand other issues that they have in their lives, especially dealing with service providers, police and the justice system. Students also help each other, giving encouragement, something which the Cuban advisers model very well, acknowledging even the smallest achievement with rounds of applause and words of praise. In these ways, as well as simply by coming to these remote locations and living in them close to the people, the Cuban advisers demonstrate that they share this ethic of solidarity and compassion.

## Decolonising solidarity

Decolonising the education process requires significant change on the part of the education professionals working in the campaigns, ourselves included. Freire understood this, though in the situations he described, the professionals were still often doing the teaching. Coming from the colonisers' 'side of the frontier', we have to open ourselves

to a different kind of educational activity to those with which we are familiar. For a start, we know almost nothing of what life has been like in those communities, for either staff or students or local leaders. In both Timor-Leste and Australia, the 'true history' of colonisation has not been told, especially not down to the level of individual communities and families. The 'culture of silence' as Freire called it is not simply because people are not confident to speak of these things. Their voices have been actively suppressed; their truths denied. This makes us, the professionals, the uneducated ones, the ones who must learn.

At the same time, what we do know is still important, and must be shared. Our 16 years experience working with this model, and the study we have done both in Cuba and elsewhere, gives us an authority, as Freire calls it. The same is true of everything else we have been privileged to learn by being members of the winning side in the imperial world system, including our understanding of the practice of teaching. But, as Allman (2007) explains in her account of Freirian pedagogy, our 'professional' knowledge and experience has to be problematised in dialogue with the knowledge of the students, the local staff and the campaign local leadership; just as theirs too has to be problematised in dialogue with ours. This is the dialectic of teaching and learning.

As popular education 'professionals', we enter a community as guests, to support people to build an alternative decolonising educational practice, drawing on what we have learned but always having to listen closely to hear how this must be contextualised to the circumstances of the people with whom we are working. Once people decide that our desire to work in solidarity with them, recognising the value of their knowledge and experience and the limitations of our own, is genuine, they have been extraordinarily generous, willing to help us to learn what we need to know and do in this particular community at this particular point in history. That is to say, they induct us into the context, such that, over time, we become better at what we have set out to do, through a dialogical process which Deborah and her LFLF colleagues have described previously in this journal (Williamson et al, 2019). This does not excuse us from doing everything we can to prepare ourselves for this work, to take advantage of the education we have had to find out what we can about the history and current circumstances of each community, always knowing however that what we think we know will change once we have been in the community for any length of time.

None of this happens quickly or easily. As with any social movement, a lot of what needs to be done is slow, difficult, often tedious work. Moreover, as professionals who have been taught to believe that we already have the knowledge and skills to do this 'properly', we have constantly to guard against 'taking charge' and asserting leadership in such a way as to reproduce the colonial relationships the campaign is designed to overcome. In Australia, we find that we must constantly remind ourselves and other professional staff that the campaign only succeeds when the local facilitators and coordinators and CWG take control. Otherwise, the campaign becomes another example of the "uncritical/reproductive practice" (Allman 2007, p.272) of colonial education, i.e., reproducing ideas and knowledge about power and control and who should exercise it that sustain colonialism.

Imperialism has been building its systems and structures, including its education structures, for a very long time, and to overcome the consequences of this is a "long haul" (Horton et al 1991). We are being asked to build a different world in the shell of the old. But this is also what makes a literacy campaign such an important foundation activity for any effort to decolonise our education systems. A campaign brings into the education process the people who the colonial structures expelled, giving them a role and a voice where they previously have had none. This is not to say that everyone who takes part and becomes more literate will become a participant in further efforts to change things. Some will, and do (Williamson & Boughton 2020). But once people have learned that this kind of learning, the learning that literate people undertake, is possible, they have the opportunity to take it further. This begins in the post-literacy phase of a campaign, which provides opportunities where the basic literacy skills that have been acquired through the lessons can be practiced (and thus consolidated) in situations of direct relevance in peoples' daily lives (Durnan & Boughton 2018).

## Conclusion

When Freire wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed in the 1960s, he was well aware of the Cuban revolution. He later worked with Cuban literacy advisers in Angola and Nicaragua in the 1970s (Perez Cruz n.d.). When he visited Cuba himself for the first time in 1987, he told Esther Perez:

> *...for me the Cuban Literacy Campaign , followed by Nicaragua several years later, can be considered in the history of education as two of the most important facts in this century (Perez 1987, p.5).*

When he died in May 1997, he was about to return to Havana to receive a medal from Castro. Because *Yo, Sí Puedo* had not yet been developed, we can never know what he might have thought about it. But we do know that the Cuban literacy specialists who developed the model were aware of Freire and his ideas and consider their work to be based on a similar philosophy. In our interview with Nydia Gonzales, another 1961 campaign veteran who in 2010 was President of the Cuban Association of Teachers, she told us she was using Freire's texts in popular education classes for advisers studying to join international YSP missions. At the same time, Cuba's literacy specialists believe they have overcome some major limitations of the Freirian approach, in particular the need for highly qualified educators to develop codifications specific to the particular situation of the students, and to undertake genuine dialogue on these codifications with students.

As teachers in the popular education tradition, we aim to enter into a creative relationship both with learners and with the context in which the learners live and work, in ways that are informed by the theoretical basis of our practice. The point is not to reproduce what Freire or anyone else knew and wrote, but to produce new knowledge, collectively. One cannot simply read Freire's theory and then apply his ideas in practice. The ideas with which we begin will necessarily change as a result of our practice, as we will ourselves as teacher/learners (Allman 2010). This is a dialectical process, which starts from the basic assumption of our own 'unfinishedness' which is simply one aspect of the 'unfinishedness' of humanity as a whole:

> *The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. (Freire 1972, pp.56-7)*

Practicing popular education, we are discovering new knowledge, about ourselves, our students and the world we together inhabit; and not just the 'world in general', but the very specific world which we and our learners inhabit at a particular point in time, in the particular locations in which we work. For this reason, we argue that to be true

to what Freire wrote is to 'rewrite' it, in our own way, based on our own experience, in our own contexts. That is to say, we have to read his 'word' through reading our own world, our own circumstances, the situations in which we are undertaking our own practice.

Likewise, the liberatory character of the Cuban YSP model cannot be known in advance, from a knowledge of its theory. It depends on how it is practiced, on the extent to which the educators who do this work embrace a Freirian-style philosophy and approach, and adopt the humanizing values of love, solidarity and critical reflection which both Freire and the Cuban School epitomise. Without this, Yo, Sí Puedo could just as easily be applied in a non-liberatory way as any other 'method'.

In our view, the work of 're-reading and re-writing' Freire must be done, not in university seminars or academic journals, but in the practice of teaching literacy on a mass scale. Without practice on this scale, it is not possible to develop a movement for change capable of transforming the material conditions in which genuinely new theory and new ideas can arise. Freire understood this, which is why he took the ideas he had developed as a student into Angicos in 1962, and then, after initial experimentation, agreed to expand his work into a country-wide campaign a little later. Freire never stopped emphasizing that popular education was a praxis, in which theory could only develop from practical activity. "We make the road by walking", as he called his talking book with Myles Horton (Horton & Freire 1990). We are fairly confident he would have supported this effort to re-read his work through the lens of our experience of the Cuban model, which has, at last count, engaged over 10 million people with low or no literacy across the globe (Valdés Abreu 2016). As they say in Timor-Leste, *A luta continua! The struggle continues!*

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