

Mass Literacy Campaigns: A Way Back to the Future?

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, mass campaigns were the dominant model of adult literacy provision, especially in countries of the Global South. After a long absence, there is now a revival of international interest in this model. This paper looks back on the earlier history of mass campaigns and the geopolitical reasons for their rejection, to help make sense of the problems encountered by more recent attempts to mount literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia. This analysis problematizes the concept of innovation, by identifying its association with a neo-liberal ideology of economic development which continues to produce adult literacy policy and programs which are ineffective at a national or global level.

Keywords: mass literacy campaigns; *Yo, sí puedo*; Cuba; UNESCO; Timor-Leste; First Nations, Australia; adult literacy policy; innovation.

In 1990, the international community's Education for All (EFA) strategy undertook to halve the number of "illiterate" and "semi-literate" adults in the world by 2015. At the end of this period, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) concluded the EFA's impact was minimal: "The rate of illiteracy is likely to have dropped slightly from 18% in 2000 to 14% in 2015" (p.135). One of UNESCO's responses was to revisit the mass literacy campaign as a way of increasing the adult literacy rates within a defined period of time. Its study of recent campaigns (Hanemann, 2015) considered several examples, including *Yo, sí puedo* (English: *Yes, I Can!*), a model developed at the end of the last century by Cuban adult literacy specialists. This paper reflects on the experience of participatory action research projects undertaken with

campaigns which used this model, in Timor-Leste (2005-2012), and in First Nations communities in Australia (2012-2020).

The *Yo, sí puedo* (hereafter YSP) campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia could be said to represent a significant innovation in the field of adult literacy provision, if we apply the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), as something which is novel, implementable, and impactful. For example, YSP is a novel, widely implemented expression of "south-south" development co-operation in the field of education (Muhr, 2015). At the same time, it maintains important continuities with the mass adult literacy campaigns of the 20th century, including Cuba's own iconic campaign in 1961. The two case studies aim to show that, whatever one might say

about innovation, adult literacy theory, policy, and practice in the 21st century remains caught between two long-standing but contradictory models of development, each of which implies its own approach to reducing the number of people in society who have low to no literacy in their country's official languages.

Mass literacy campaigns have been a feature of societies undergoing major change for the last 400 years (Arnove & Graff, 2008). In the 20th century, they were adopted by many revolutionary and anticolonial independence movements and newly independent countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of "functional literacy" was proposed by adult education specialists, largely from the United States, as an "innovative" alternative to this mass approach. This model favored small-scale selective and preferably non-government adult literacy programs, focussed on vocational skills which improve economic productivity.

The paper begins with a closer look at this earlier history, when the concept of "innovation" was first deployed in the literacy field. The next sections discuss aspects of the campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia which show the extent to which the mass campaign model was considered marginal to the "real" literacy work supported by international agencies and their member western governments. In the final section, I return to the concept of innovation, to highlight its continued complicity in the neoliberal project of global capitalism.

The Historical Context

A mass adult literacy campaign is a coordinated, sustained effort by a community, region, or nation to raise the level of literacy of its least literate adults. It mobilizes local resources, local organizers, and local facilitators to support as

many people as possible to learn very basic literacy, within a relatively short timeframe, using a simple standardized method contextualized to local circumstances, followed by a period of community-run consolidation activities, called post-literacy. According to the Indian scholar H.S. Bhola (1984), campaigns are driven by a passionate commitment to greater social equality and a belief in the possibility of a better future for all. They almost always occur as part of a wider social movement for development, self-determination, and independence. They differ from literacy programs primarily in the degree of popular mobilization and commitment they embody. A campaign is "hot" compared with program, which is "cold." A campaign requires technical expertise, but it is also driven by a specific ideology, most commonly anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist (Bhola, 1984), but not always (Cherewka & Prins, 2022).

By the 1960s, such campaigns were well known, having been an important component of "popular" or "peoples" education in the nation-building projects of many countries, including by post-independence and post-revolutionary governments in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam and, most recently, Cuba. In 1961, the United Nations General Assembly debated a resolution sponsored by Ukraine, calling for a global campaign to eradicate illiteracy:

The representatives of Czechoslovakia, the Ukrainian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) and Venezuela, among others, contended that the colonial powers had held up the development of education in the countries under their rule in order to ensure a supply of cheap labour.... The spokesmen for Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and others pointed out that no direct relationship existed between illiteracy and colonialism, since illiteracy was a common factor to all developing countries, whether or not they had been under colonial rule. (United Nations, 1963, p. 352-3)

In the language used at this time by UNESCO, "illiteracy" resulted from a lack of "fundamental education," considered an important foundation

for a more peaceful and prosperous world. Universal primary education provision was one part of achieving this, but the other, equally important component was universal adult literacy (Lind, 2008). Together these two would guarantee a right to education for all, a right enshrined in Article 22 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In the Cold War context of the 1960s, however, campaigns which mobilized “the masses” were suspect, from the point of view of western capitalist countries, especially the United States. According to Dorn and Chodsee (2012):

...after the widely recognized success of Cuba's 'mass' literacy campaign in 1961, UNESCO faced increasing pressure from the Johnson administration to redefine its literacy programs as 'functional' (the term used to refer to vocationally oriented literacy) rather than 'mass' (the term used to refer to literacy that was meant to achieve a political or social goal such as consciousness raising), the latter having become associated with Cuba and communism. (p. 375)

In September 1965, a World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy was held in Tehran, the capital of Iran. It put aside the term “fundamental education,” and adopted instead the new term, “functional literacy.” This signaled the international community’s decision to abandon the universal provision of literacy education to adults, in favor of a selective approach, prioritizing only those sections of the population who, it was believed, would be most likely to contribute to more rapid economic development. The wisdom of this approach was to be tested in the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP), “designed to pave the way for the eventual execution of a world campaign” (UNESCO/ UNDP 1976, p. 9). The EWLP was not a campaign, though some called it one. Rather, it was a series of discrete projects or programs, designed to test the functional literacy model. It ran from 1966 to 1973, with projects in 11 countries, managed by

UNESCO and funded largely by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and national partner governments.

UNESCO and UNDP’s own evaluation at the end of the program explained the meaning which the EWLP’s planners had given to the concept of “functional literacy.” “Briefly, the idea was to combine literacy and numeracy with a program of education in basic vocational skills directly linked to the occupational needs of participants” (UNESCO/UNDP 1976, p.116). The evaluation makes many references to the “innovations” the EWLP was designed to test. The concept of innovation was being applied at the same time to adult basic education programs in the United States, with prominent adult education scholars undertaking large scale surveys of “Special Experimental Demonstration Projects” funded under the Adult Education Act, which involved the use of innovative methods, systems, materials or programs (Darkenwald, 1977; Mezirow & Irish, 1975).

The EWLP evaluators concluded that the functional approach led to some benefits, but only minor improvements in participants’ literacy. Their words remain relevant today:

In retrospect, it seems unfortunate that, **in their comprehensible haste to act, EWLP’s framers did not assess (or assess with more care) earlier successful mass literacy campaigns.** Had the Cuban, and similar experiences been taken more fully into account, the world program might well have avoided certain pitfalls. (UNESCO & UNDP, 1976. pp.176-7. My emphasis)

This critical tone reflected a shift in the international debates around education and development, as a growing number of newly independent countries questioned the modernization paradigm in which economic growth was said to provide a path out of poverty. Instead, these countries saw poverty in their countries as the product of unequal global economic exchange relations between the north

and the south, and wanted major social change (Youngman, 2000). By 1975, this alternative development approach, known as dependency theory, was underpinning a more radical theory and practice of literacy provision, of which the most famous example was the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1978).

Delegates to an international symposium on literacy held in 1975 in Iran concluded that the selective and intensive approaches of the EWLP were insufficient. In the Declaration of Persepolis, they resolved that literacy should be seen as “not just the process of learning the skills of reading and writing and arithmetic; but a contribution to the liberation of man (sic) and to his full development... (it) creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society (cited in Bhola, 1984, pp. 12-13).

When UNESCO’s Arthur Gillette revisited the EWLP for Arnove and Graff’s edited collection on literacy campaigns, he wrote:

Innovativeness was, in fact, a major if largely unstated, element of the EWLP...

.. the EWLP strategists virtually ignored **the recently completed Cuban Literacy Campaign, which was anything but innovative in technical terms** . . . which indeed violated several basic EWLP precepts (it was massive rather than selective, it was politically rather than vocationally functional, it used a single curriculum and manual rather than a diversified/adapted approach, and it was definitive rather than experimental)—which was nevertheless a resounding success. The Cuban effort demonstrated forcefully that **pedagogically un-innovative literacy action could succeed**. (Gillette, 2008, p 205. My emphasis)

Mass campaigns remained out of favor with international agencies and western governments for the remainder of the century. One of the most cited critics, the World Bank’s Helen Abadzi, justified the bank’s decision not to fund adult literacy at scale because of the low success rate of mass campaigns (Abadzi, 1994). But her data was from the EWLP, for which national campaigns were

ruled ineligible, even where, as in Guinea, this was the government’s priority (Lind, 2008, p. 62).

While UNESCO and western governments turned away from mass literacy campaigns, many countries in the Global South continued to adopt them. In Arnove and Graff’s collection of campaign studies, first published in 1987, the 1980 Nicaraguan campaign is the most recent example. Almost 30 years later, UNESCO identified 29 countries which had run campaigns since 1992, of which only one, the UK’s Skills for Life campaign, was in the so-called developed world (Hanemann, 2015). The continued relevance of this historical and geopolitical context to contemporary practice is illustrated in the next two sections of the paper.

The Return of the Literacy Campaign in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste occupies the eastern half of a small island 400 nautical miles off the north coast of Australia, an hour’s flight from Darwin, the capital of Australia’s Northern Territory. From the late 1600s, it was held to be one of Portugal’s external territories, until the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974 initiated a process of decolonization. This was violently interrupted when the Indonesian army invaded in December 1975, beginning a military occupation which lasted 24 years, and resulted in the deaths of 120,000 Timorese, out of a population in 1975 of 600,000. A United Nations-supervised referendum in August 1999 led to the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and officials, and a 2-year period of United Nations transitional administration. United Nations rule ended in May 2002, with the restoration of independence and the inauguration of the First Constitutional government. At that time, the adult population was just over 500,000, of whom more than 40% had been identified by the census as “illiterate.” (World Bank, 2004, p. xvii)

Planning for Timor-Leste's national literacy campaign began at the First National Adult Literacy Conference in the capital, Dili, in 2004. The Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, a founding member, in 1974, of the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Portuguese: Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, abbreviated hereafter as FRETILIN) opened the conference in these words:

Learning to read and write is to liberate. Literacy is a national priority, because Timor-Leste needs all the population to understand the process of development, to consolidate democracy and to have the capacity to intervene in their own life. (Fieldnotes 15/9/04).

The conference heard reports on the 1961 Cuban campaign and the campaign in the state of Kerala in India, which began in 1988. There were also contributions from veterans of a previous campaign in Timor in 1974-75, which was led by university and high school students from FRETILIN and continued for several more years in the FRETILIN-controlled areas in the mountains after the Indonesian army invaded (Da Silva, 2011). The Prime Minister undertook to support a national campaign, and the next year negotiated an agreement with Cuba to send an initial literacy mission to help mount the campaign. The first 11 Cuban advisors arrived at the end of 2005.

In 2006, FRETILIN's Minister of Education, Sra Rosaria Corte-Real, invited me and two other non-Timorese researchers from the University of New England in Australia to conduct a participatory action research (PAR) evaluation of the campaign and its impacts. Our work was funded by the Australian Research Council as part of a study of the contribution of adult education to post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction. The evaluation team worked with the National Campaign Secretariat, in offices located in the Ministry of Education's Non-Formal Education Centre in Dili. The Secretariat consisted of the Ministry's

Timorese campaign coordinator, the two Cuban nationals who led the adviser mission, a Cuban adviser responsible for collecting and analysing the campaign statistics, a representative of FRETILIN's women's organization, the Popular Organisation of Timorese Women (OPMT), and two representatives from the Timorese popular education network *Dai Popular*. We worked for 12 months in-country during 2006 and 2007. The campaign was launched by the government in January 2007, and the first classes opened in Dili in June. We made a further 15 trips of 1-3 weeks duration, to continue our study. The campaign finished at the end of 2012, and the last Cuban adviser mission left in February 2013 (Boughton, 2012).

Our PAR approach involved working collaboratively with the Timorese and Cuban educators to document and critically analyze the campaign as it developed, through processes of dialogue and reflection with campaign staff and participants, the campaign leadership at various levels, and with the Minister and other members of the government. Our research methods included analyzing statistical data from the national census; reviewing primary and secondary sources on the history of Timor-Leste and its pre-independence education systems; reviewing international literacy campaigns; interviews with key actors; participant-observation in literacy classes, training sessions, meetings and workshops; and presentation to local adult educators and academic audiences in workshops and conferences. In 2010, we spent 2 weeks in Havana, Cuba, reviewing our findings with staff of the Institute for Pedagogy in Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) and members of the Cuban popular education network (Boughton & Durnan, 2021).

Why Cuba?

In 2004, when we began work, several United Nations organizations maintained a presence

in the country, along with many donor country aid agencies and international NGOs. Since their arrival in 1999, and in some cases from an earlier period when they worked with the Indonesian occupying authorities, these agencies had developed a variety of responses to the issue of low literacy. The Department of Non-Formal Education included several tertiary-educated international advisers employed as United Nations “volunteers” by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), to work on projects funded, not just by UNDP but also by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank and by donor country aid agencies from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Brazil. Two adult literacy programs were already underway, one funded by the Brazilian government, and the other by UNICEF, which under the United Nations system had overall responsibility for education.

The FRETILIN government’s Education Sector Investment Plan called for greater coordination:

There is an urgent need to review and revise the policy framework and associated strategy for provision of literacy and adult education programs. The Government wishes to draw on experience of other developing countries in adult education and literacy programs and evaluate the experience to date in Timor-Leste with CFET and donor funded programs. **With an agreed policy framework in place and clearly identified target groups for these programs, the Government would then look to the donor community to support the national program rather than continue with the fragmented and piecemeal approach of the past** (Democratic Republic of Timor Leste, 2005, p. 41; my emphasis)

With this mandate, we began mapping these agencies and their programs, so as to understand better the context in which the system of Timorese-controlled adult education was developing.

As we undertook this work, members of the international adviser community regularly expressed views which were hostile both to the FRETILIN government and the Cuban mission.

It became clear that United Nations agencies followed a pre-planned model of post-conflict development and reconstruction, derived from experience in other countries, especially Afghanistan. The majority of their international staff had little understanding of the specific history of the Timorese independence struggle. Many viewed the legacy of the occupation, including the education system built by the occupying power, as appropriate to the country’s needs, even to the point of challenging the FRETILIN government’s decision to make Portuguese and Tetum the official languages, rather than Indonesian or English, the languages of their previous occupier and its two main regional allies, Australia and the United States.

This was the context in which the international agencies and advisers continued to implement projects in literacy, adult education and capacity-building, often in direct competition with the government’s own national literacy campaign. In the year the literacy campaign was launched, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded eight small non-government organizations to mount separate literacy projects, using materials developed by a UNDP adviser with funding from UNICEF. According to USAID’s evaluation:

Seven of the eight projects were linked to business development through the selection of economically active participants. Two of these grants... also engaged these same learners in business development through cooperatives or savings and credit groups (Anis, 2007, p.10).

The report failed to mention the national campaign or the Cuban mission, even though campaign classes were already underway in some of the same locations as these projects. Our analysis of this phenomenon highlighted the contradiction between donor-led reconstruction efforts informed by neoliberal development theory and FRETILIN’s decolonising project, which aimed

to establish an independent development path based on its own history and its roots in the anti-colonial independence movements of the late 20th century (Boughton, 2009).

What we did not know then, but which subsequent historical research clarified, was that adult literacy education has been caught in this contradiction for over 60 years, and that actions and attitudes of the officials of the United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and of many of the western donor countries were an outcome of this history. Seen through this historical lens, international opposition to Cuba's "south-south" development cooperation effort arose from two sources. The first was hostility of the United States and its western allies to the Cuban revolution of 1959 and its subsequent role in supporting liberation movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The second was that, by seeking to mobilize the whole population in the process of developing its independence and breaking free of its colonial past, the government's campaign directly contradicted the primary goal of western international aid: to ensure that Timor-Leste and its resources, including the oil fields in the Timor Sea, would be successfully incorporated into its "rightful place" in the so-called international order of globalized capitalism (Cleary, 2007).

In the midst of the campaign preparations, a mutiny among sections of the security forces heightened external and internal opposition to FRETILIN's political program, and the international community exerted pressure on the Prime Minister to stand aside. Prior to new parliamentary elections in 2007, international aid flowed into the country to support multiple new political parties, and the election resulted in a new anti-FRETILIN coalition government. The Cuban literacy mission survived these changes, but the

new Minister of Education abandoned significant elements of the campaign model, dismantling the national campaign structures of national district and sub-district commissions coordinated through the Secretariat and placing the campaign under the direct control of Ministry of Education officials. Basic literacy classes continued, eventually reaching over 200,000 people, but the wider social mobilization was wound down in most communities. The post-literacy phase, to consolidate what was learned in the basic classes, was abandoned altogether. The coordinated national campaign which the Cuban model had envisaged was thus reduced to the status of another one of the numerous literacy programs funded by the international agencies. At the same time, these alternative programs gained increasing support from the World Bank, ILO, and UNESCO.

Our research team drafted a Strategic Plan for Non-Formal Education, which proposed continuing with the Cuban mass campaign model, while deploying the NGO and other internationally-funded programs as a post literacy phase, but this was not adopted. Instead, the Ministry chose the selective approach, focussing its non-formal education efforts and funding—now re-named Recurrent Education—on the more economically active sections of the population which could be absorbed into a slowly emerging private sector labour market. By the time of our final visit in 2015, the original national campaign with its focus on mass mobilization and participation of all sectors was a distant memory, and a new generation of Ministry officials and international advisers with whom we met knew almost nothing of its history. Nevertheless, the activists from the popular education movement continued to work with FRETILIN, advocating for an alternative decolonising model of education for development, based on the theories of Paulo Freire, Che Guevara and Amílcar Cabral

(Boughton, 2013; Urban et al., 2020).

YSP in Australia

One of our research partners in Timor-Leste was Ngemba man Jack Beetson, a leader in the development of Aboriginal community-controlled adult education in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2009, the Lowitja Institute, Australia's only national First Nations-controlled health research institute, funded a national roundtable of First Nations health and education leaders to discuss our Timor-Leste research. This meeting decided to seek Australian and Cuban government support to pilot a campaign in Australia. In 2011, the Federal Labor government agreed to fund a trial in Wilcannia, a small remote "outback" town in the state of New South Wales. The Cuban ambassador to Australia, who was a *brigadista* in the 1961 Cuban campaign, helped secure an adviser, an English-speaking lecturer from the José Varona University in Havana, where the Institute that developed YSP was based. The trial began in 2012, and ran for 2 years, with results significantly better than previous adult literacy programs in this community. Observers from local First Nations organizations and government agencies in the town attributed this success to the degree of community ownership and control which the model allowed, and the high level of community mobilization it achieved to support the participants and their locally recruited facilitators. One of these facilitators told our research team:

...this is the best thing that ever could have happened for this little town ... You know, don't stop at one town. Let's keep going. Let's keep it rolling on.... you've got to spread it along, spread the word, take it to other communities, and keep it alive. Keep it alive. (Boughton et al, 2013, p. 28)

Other communities in the state's far west asked to join the campaign and some additional government funding was secured. The First Nations campaign leadership established a

national organization, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), to lead a roll out of the model across the country, region by region. By then, however, an election had produced a change of government at the Federal level. Now, 9 years later, LFLF has only managed to secure grants of 1-3 years for short-term campaigns in 12 communities, spread across three jurisdictions, Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The funding covered the costs of running classes for 1-5 intakes per community with an average 16 students per intake, well short of the number needed to have a significant impact on overall literacy rates in all but the smallest communities. That said, the campaign has employed and trained over 60 local First Nations staff, and achieved retention and completion rates four to five times higher than First Nations students achieve in the formal accredited courses for low literate students run through Australia's vocational education and training system. The Australian Research Council funded a longitudinal study of the impact of the campaign, the published results of which demonstrate that the campaigns not only raised participants literacy levels, but also led to reduced negative justice system interactions, increased engagement in education, and improved community solidarity and empowerment (Beetson et al, 2022; Boughton & Williamson, 2022; Weitzel, 2018; Williamson & Boughton, 2021).

Neither this evidence, nor a recommendation from a parliamentary inquiry into adult literacy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, p. 165), has convinced governments to "scale up" to a genuine mass campaign, as happened with YSP in many other countries, or with the Kha Ri Gude campaign in South Africa (McKay, 2015). Meanwhile, the majority of First Nations adults in both rural and urban communities struggle with low to very low English language literacy, with all the associated social and economic problems this

entails (Lin et al, 2021).

Mainstream forms of adult literacy provision in the United States consistently demonstrate their inability to reach the vast majority of their potential clients, and fail the majority of those whom they do reach (Jacobson, 2020). Similarly, in Australia, the only dedicated Federal funding for adult literacy is a foundations skills program, which provides opportunities for eligible jobseekers to undertake formal accredited vocational education system courses with registered training providers. Even the lowest levels of these courses, Certificate One and Two, have proved unable to attract, let alone retain, sufficient First Nations students with low to very low English literacy to keep pace with the number leaving secondary schooling each year with only minimal English literacy. Most people with minimal literacy therefore finish up joining the “surplus population” unable to gain secure long-term employment, or even to comply with the complex bureaucratic procedures involved in maintaining eligibility for government income assistance. Thousands of people are thus condemned to live in relative and absolute poverty, a condition which increases their vulnerability to police harassment and incarceration, and to a range of physical, social and emotional health problems.

Literacy Policy and Innovation

A country’s adult literacy policy, like its education policy more generally, is subject to international influences, including from international agencies and forums, such as UNESCO and the OECD. The majority of practitioners may be unaware of the influence of this international context on their particular program or project, as indeed may be its donors and funders. But, literacy policy, like literacy itself, has a context. Many writers in recent years have placed the “vocational turn”

in literacy policy in the context of the rise of neoliberalism, whereas this paper shows that the vocational turn originated, not in the years of Reagan and Thatcher, but much earlier, in the 1960s. The appearance of a rightward shift in the 1980s disguised an underlying continuity, only briefly disrupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the rise of anti-colonial and anti-racist countries and movements.

The collapse of the USSR in 1989 and the rise of the new economic orthodoxy known as the Washington consensus further reduced the space for radical adult education. This was the context in which UNESCO and the World Bank, supported by other international agencies and donor countries, moved the bulk of education funding for the Global South into basic and vocational education, leaving only small amounts for non-formal mass adult literacy education, to be conducted by NGOs. Some scholars associated with the “new literacy studies” welcomed this, because it offered more scope for the valorisation of local literacy practices (Rogers & Street, 2012). However, the desire to defend and support those practices led them to repeat the World Bank’s inaccurate evaluations of past mass campaigns (Boughton, 2016).

In the wake of the global financial crisis, the OECD nominated innovation as a key concept for policy makers in its member states, reviving this old idea for new times, calling it “a crucial factor in maintaining competitiveness in a globalized economy.” As in its previous incarnations, “innovation” promises the benefits which will flow from applying scientific and technical expertise to economic and social problems. It is now also capable of being measured scientifically, with a range of indicators available to show the extent to which countries adopt policy innovations. As the literature of innovation studies has grown, so too has an emerging critique, which identifies a “pro-

innovation bias” in neoliberal ideology and new public management theory (Godin & Vink, 2017).

Progressive social movements in several countries, of which some have won a measure of state power, meanwhile continue to support the mass campaign approach. Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement used Cuba’s YSP model to build literacy as part of their efforts to develop their own community-controlled education system with its own schools (Tarlau, 2019). In Venezuela and Bolivia, YSP campaign teachers and graduates formed the social base of experiments in participatory democracy supported by reforming national governments (Artaraz, 2012). In South Africa, the African National Congress government commissioned a study of YSP in Cuba and Venezuela, before adapting many of YSPs features in its own version, the Kha Ri Gude campaign, which raised the literacy of over 3 million people (McKay, 2015). The Total Literacy Campaign in India, initiated by the People’s Science Movement in the state of Kerala in 1988, has now expanded to the whole country (Karlekar, 2004), and continues under a new name, the Saakshar Bharat Mission, which aims to reach 70 million people (Hanemann, 2015, pp 63-67). In the advanced capitalist countries of the Global North (including Australia), however, the mass campaign continues to be viewed with suspicion, and the selective, functional vocational model of literacy provision via small-scale accredited formal programs remains dominant.

What Goes Around, Comes Around

In 1980, Jonathan Kozol wrote an article reflecting his time in Cuba in the 1970s, studying the 1961 campaign and its impacts. When he asked Raul Ferrer, Cuba’s Minister of Education, why Cuba had succeeded where UNESCO’s EWLP projects had not, Ferrer responded:

Why do they fail? They have the money. They have UNESCO. They have the expertise. They have the international promotion. How is it possible then, that they do not succeed? It is because the starting point is antihuman . . . They do not dare to use the words we use. They do not dare to speak of land reform, to speak about the sick and poor . . . the international corporations and banks . . . They do not dare to put these words into the hands of the poor people. And, because they do not dare, therefore they fail—and they will always fail until they do. (Kozol, 1980, p. 29)

Turning his attention to the United States, Kozol (1980) claimed there were “twenty-five million American adults (who) can neither read nor handle basic mathematical computations” (p. 29). This situation could not be overcome with current approaches, which he called:

a piecemeal low-key unprovocative non-controversial and generally ineffective programme, one which is begun in generosity, carried out in condescension, and concluded in benign defeat (p. 34).

He acknowledged the good work being done by Literacy Volunteers of America, Laubach Literacy International, and several other groups, but it was reaching only 2-4% of those in need. His conclusion was this:

For those who have not been reached up to this time, it is apparent that something new is needed. That ‘something new’ is an approach that has never yet been ventured in this country: an all-out effort, a total mobilization, a ‘National Campaign’. (p. 36)

Conclusion

Until the 1980s, many other western adult literacy practitioners, scholars and advocates likewise promoted the mass campaign approach, seeing it as a novel way for communities, regions and whole nations to mobilize the resources needed to address the legacies of education inequality. Few of these advocates subscribed to “the literacy myth” (Black & Yasukawa, 2014), that simply improving one’s literacy would automatically lead to other benefits. Like Ferrer and Freire, they understood that literacy is only acquired (or indeed, not acquired) in context, through historically-specific social practices. The real target of the new

literacy studies critiques of the “literacy myth” was not mass campaigns, but human capital theory, which has underpinned the promotion of functional literacy, and now vocational literacy, since the 1960s. This theory is ideological, because it implies that people can escape from poverty by raising their education level, without any need to transform the social system which creates the inequality in the first place.

In the 21st century, discussion of innovation must not be allowed to obscure, once again, the “fundamental education” question: What adult literacy education practices are most likely to help people with minimal literacy to participate in movements to overcome their inequality? This is the question which faced the Citizenship and Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement (Levine, 2004), the July 4th movement in Cuba around the same time, and the Sandinista literacy crusade in 1980 (Arnové, 1981). The same question faced the newly-independent FRETILIN government in Timor-Leste in 2004 and is now facing many First Nations communities in Australia.

Mass adult literacy campaigns are an important part of the answer to this question, but are not likely to be classified as an appropriate innovation in the policy discourses of neoliberalism. This is not because a campaign is less creative, or because it fails to unleash an urge of change. Rather, it is because its power comes from its history, and the long tradition of popular education from which it arose (Boughton & Durnan, 2021). As argued above, those who sought to suppress this model did so in the name of innovation. Their aim was to promote economic growth, which would lead to greater prosperity for all. After 60 years, this model is totally discredited. In contrast to “trickle down,” we have what Arundhati Roy named “gush up” - a world in which inequality has risen to obscene levels (Roy, 2014).

A key feature of innovation as ideology has always been its emphasis on the application of social science to problems of economic development and growth, in particular the social science practiced in the United States and its allies. However, critical innovation studies demonstrate that this social science has its own ideological underpinnings in neoclassical economic theory and Parsonian sociology (Godin & Vinck 2017). A fundamental assumption is that the western model of capitalist development is universally applicable, and that, given the right scientific and technical advice, all societies can achieve the maximum possible welfare for all their citizens. Human capital theory is central to this approach.

The current fascination with innovation is another episode in a much longer story about conflicting models of development. Innovation, as much now as it did in the EWLP of the 1970s, conceals its underlying political and social program beneath apparently neutral terms, suggesting that economic growth and the innovation said to help drive it, are always and everywhere of benefit to everyone. The missing element, now as previously, is the scientific and technical expertise which originates largely in the “developed” world of western governments and international agencies. The innovations which receive support are those which reflect this view of what constitutes desirable change. In the impoverished communities of Timor-Leste and Indigenous Australia, the mass literacy campaign might well have been seen as innovative, and the refusal of international donors in one case and governments in the other seen as resistance to change. The fact that this did not happen, and that these campaigns struggled to receive support, is a sign of the continuing marginalization of “southern theory” (Connell 2007), and a testament to the enduring hegemony of western capitalist models of development.

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