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Literacy Campaigns: The Cuban experience in the Public Library context

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Summary:

In this essay the author discusses basic literacy, the teaching of people to read and write within the context of the great cultural work of the Cuban Revolutionary Government. He demonstrates the public library's contribution to achieving this goal. The paper describes the post-1959 experiences of the work accomplished by libraries during three significant periods of Cuban history: first, the national Literacy Campaign, which made it possible to teach reading and writing to the great number of Cuban illiterates thereby allowing Cuba to declare itself free of illiteracy; second, teaching literacy in Braille to the blind and visually handicapped in the 1970s; and third, training librarians and users in digital literacy and the use of the new information technologies within the scope of the scarce technological resources available to them.

Introduction:

The situation in Cuba before 1959, regarding education in general, is one of clear

deterioration and a high rate of illiteracy within the poorest areas of the population who made up the majority of the Cuban people.

"In 1958, four figures reflected the deplorable state of education.

- One million completely illiterate
- More than one million semi-illiterate
- 600 thousand children without schools
- 10,000 unemployed teachers" (1)

Funds devoted to education were systematically stolen by employees who had access to the education budget.

The outlook for public libraries was as bleak as that of education. Fermín Peraza, in his work Directory of Cuban Libraries, published in 1952, stated that in Cuba some 483 libraries existed in 1951. Later, in an analysis carried out by Dr. Emilio Setién for his article "The Development of the National Library during 75 Years and Its Influence in the Country's Library Movement," the Cuban library specialist found that of the 483 libraries 108 were public. Of the 108 existing public libraries, thirteen contained no more than 1000 volumes more than twenty years after their inception and twelve did not reach that figure after having existed for some ten years. More than twelve were unable to provide information about their collections. Of the total, forty two were concentrated in the province of Havana, basically in the metropolitan area.(2)

In November 1954, the National Organization of Popular Bookmobiles (ONBAP) was created. This was an incipient network of libraries under the auspices of the Fulgencio Batistia government. The government's plans called for the creation of fifty public libraries in Cuba. By 1958, the same year that we are using as a reference point for the condition of education in Cuba, they had only created twenty one, each receiving a maximum monthly budget of \$225.00, enough to cover only personnel, rent and maintenance costs. (3)

Faced with such a situation it was impossible for public libraries to play a significant role in creating literacy among the millions of Cubans who did not know how to read and write. "Buildings existed that held and loaned books... performing a service, but in the true meaning of the word they weren't libraries." (4)

This was the social context that the Revolutionary Government inherited in 1959, which we shall elaborate below, when it took on the task of creating an educational and cultural program to transform radically the preceding image to one of optimism and hope.

The national Literacy Campaign.

In order to counteract the existence of the high number of illiterates, the newly founded Revolutionary Government established and prepared high priority tasks,

such as the creation in September 1959 of 10,000 new classrooms and increasing the number of rural teachers who brought education to the Cuban countryside.

The law that nationalized all levels of education and made education freely available was passed on June 6, 1961, and on December 16 the first comprehensive education reform was put into law. At the beginning of 1961, "with the intent to bring education to the most isolated areas of the country, 3000 volunteer teachers left for the mountains. They included school teachers and young people in or graduated from high school and middle school. They were organized later into the Vanguard Frank País Teacher's Brigade." (5)

So began the first national Literacy Campaign in Cuba, which, for the first time in many geographically isolated areas in Cuba, brought cultural development to the people. In one year, 707,000 illiterates became literate. Under the spirit of that campaign an adult education program was initiated, creating the Workers and Farmworkers Schools, which in turn opened university doors to workers.

The first phase of the Literacy Campaign and the teaching reform plans were successfully completed on December 22, 1961. In January of that year, concurrently with the beginning of the campaign, the National Council of Culture (today the Ministry of Culture) was founded, and given the task of creating the National Network of Public Libraries taking the ONBAP as its model. This true network made possible the organization and the incremental increase in the quality and number of libraries on the entire island. From its inception, the network supported the literacy campaign with the few existing libraries and librarian services, thereby allowing the illiterate, semi-literate and literate population access to books, pamphlets, and others documents that had been collected. Many librarians, along the length of the island would continue the work begun by the volunteer teachers who had dedicated their help to the population of the recently literate communities.

In 1962, searching for new ways to enhance the cultural development of the population, another no less important initiative, the Reading Campaign completed the Cuban Revolution's initial proposals. To this task, under the management of Doctor María Teresa Freyre de Andrade, then director of the José Martí National Library and the National Public Library System, Cuban public libraries were added to the campaign. The Reading Campaign strengthened the efforts carried out by those young teachers and by those needing hope.

"More and more the National Library and the public libraries contributed to popular education, to the study of our national history, to the development of love for and knowledge of the best of our culture in the fields of arts and sciences, and the best of our national traditions."(6)

All of these initiatives that delivered literacy to the great masses of illiterates, as well as the guarantee of free continuing education from the primary grades through the advanced levels, were made possible by the publication of appropriate

educational materials through the creation of the National Publishing House of Cuba in 1962, Ediciones Revolucionarias in 1965, and the Cuban Institute of the Book and its network of bookstores in 1967. Public libraries increased their bibliographic collections, expanded the number of subjects held in their collections and considerably improved their information services while at the same time playing an important supporting role in the education and the general culture of the Cuban population. This demanding job of teaching allowed Cuba to declare itself the first country in Latin American free of illiteracy.

A second important phase in the educational work with the illiterate population occurred at the end of the 1970s. Many Cubans participated in this new government supported campaign and, to a considerable extent, public librarians from various communities and municipalities around the country. Thus, an important opportunity was made available to an important group of disabled individuals: the blind.

The Literacy Campaign for the blind.

The Literacy Campaign for the blind constitutes an example of Cuban efforts to integrate the handicapped into society. This campaign began in 1979 and by 1983 more than 1500 blind people had learned to read and write by means of the Braille writing system, an achievement that UNESCO recognized by awarding Cuba the Nadiezdha Krupskaia Prize.

The literacy teachers in this case were blind themselves and knew the Braille system, librarians from the municipal public libraries and activists from the Federation of Cuban Women among others, under the national coordination of Álvaro Montes de Oca, visually handicapped and an experienced professor.

The public libraries were places where the blind could learn the Braille writing system. The librarians used a primer, developed by Zacarías Alvisa, a blind teacher of Braille "that allowed people with normal vision to teach reading and writing to the disabled."⁽⁷⁾ The teaching work was conducted under the auspices of the National Association of the Blind (ANCI) and the Ministry of Education and, in turn, under the guidance of the National Board of Libraries of the Ministry of Culture which assumed responsibility for the methodology adopted for this work in the Cuban public library network. The results of this project were successfully demonstrated in the provincial libraries and other libraries throughout the entire island, Ceinfuegos' Provincial Library being the most important whose work with the blind and visually handicapped was widely observed and emulated.

From this campaign, librarians began to create reading rooms and other areas where they developed Braille collections enabling the newly literate blind access to information. Thus began a period of technical-professional preparation of librarians designed to equip them with the knowledge and the means allowing them to offer a specialized service of this type to their users.

The literacy campaign provided the blind new opportunities such as "the creation of special schools in every province, the opening of reading rooms, the unveiling of a Braille press, and an increase in the number of blind professionals and technicians."(8)

The Cuban experience was presented by Cuban librarians and shared with the international library community at the 60th General Conference of IFLA held in Havana in 1994. Subsequently, Cuba was represented at the First Forum of Literacy for the Blind held in Montevideo in 1996. There, the island's librarians demonstrated their willingness to collaborate with other countries of Latin America.

This process of teaching reading and writing in Braille, which began more than twenty years ago, has been retained as an ongoing responsibility in Cuban society and in the public libraries, because the need continues. Some examples of this work in Havana are: the Braille reading rooms in the municipal libraries in the La Lisa and Diez de Octubre neighborhoods, as well as the work carried out by the Rubén Martín Villena Public Library, which reports to the Office of the Historian of Havana, that routinely advises the Public Library System in the capital. The Villena Library has implemented a literacy course for the blind, visually handicapped, and sighted that lasts three months and is taught by a blind librarian with the collaboration and coordination of the Association of the Blind in Old Havana.

The rise of modern information and communication technologies in the final years of the last century, and in what is now the third millennium has created new populations of illiterates in the world and especially in the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean. The rapid advance of these new technologies stands in marked contrast to the poverty of the Third World and the scarcity of financial resources of developing countries like Cuba. The rise of the information age has today created a powerful computer industry, making countries like Cuba search for alternative solutions that allow the population in general, and the librarians and information workers in particular, to find solutions to technological illiteracy. To move forward in order not to be left behind is currently an important priority for Cuban librarians.

Literacy in the new information and communication technologies.

The arrival in Cuba of the French IRIS-60 computer in the second half of the 1960s, marked the beginning of the development of this discipline in our country and with it, all that was necessary for the teaching and implementation of this new technology. Even today it remains an important priority for Cuban society.

"Since the end of the 1960s, both main frames and minicomputers were used to introduce computerization into higher education, particularly in the fields of mathematics, physics, and in some areas of engineering. Its extension to other fields occurred with the appearance of microcomputers in the 1980s. By the 1970-71 school year the University of Havana had begun a degree program in

Cybernetics."(9)

The degree offered in Information Science Technology and Library Science, which later would change its name to Library and Information Science, was also created in the 1970s. Its curriculum included computing among the courses, thus allowing future professionals to acquire the knowledge that this discipline demanded.

But the teaching of computing was not limited to universities. As part of a strategy to prepare for the present and the future, the teaching of this subject was begun in primary and secondary schools, polytechnic schools and in alternative sites such as the more than 300 computer youth clubs which were spread throughout the entire country. This has resulted in the need for information literacy for the entire population, including those public librarians who had graduated from earlier educational programs that didn't include computing.

This third literacy campaign, which like the previous ones was undertaken by Cuban society under the leadership of the Cuban Revolutionary Government, was made possible despite the continued existence of unfavorable economic conditions created by the U.S. blockade of the island. Thanks to the rational and intelligent utilization of resources that the country makes available and in particular its human capital, a far-reaching and comprehensive project called Computerization of Cuban Society has been conceived.

"Computerization is the ordered and massive application of those technologies in all spheres of Cuban society, where its appropriate and rational use means greater effectiveness and greater efficiency, thereby creating greater wealth and improvement in the quality of life of the citizens."(10)

By reason of the assumptions in this statement, public libraries have been added to the computerization program. Previously librarians initiated professional development in computational technology, even in areas where the libraries were not yet equipped with computers. To do this they took advantage of the computer youth clubs that had been created in the municipalities and provinces of the country and it was there that librarians educated themselves in the use of computers. The strategy that emerged has been to prepare librarians for the arrival of new technologies in their libraries. Once trained, the librarians would be capable of teaching computer literacy to users who increasingly required this knowledge thereby contributing to the improvement of the information services that their library offers.

Of course some Cuban librarians like many of their colleagues in many parts of the world, have a fear of the new. Still, the overwhelming advance of the new information and communication technologies has convinced us that today it is necessary to stay the course to avoid falling behind the times as information professionals. This is a decision that, in the case of the public libraries has led to the incorporation of the Computerization Program of Cuban society, which will benefit considerably the work of Cuban librarians, enhance their professional

image, enable them to automate processing, and add value to the information services they offer.

The Computerization Program of Cuban society, or the new literacy, is being developed in phases and priorities. Although the economic blockade slows down the speed with which the program can be accomplished, notable advances are already discerned in education, health, banking and basic industry.

Presently, the Methodological Department of the National Public Library System of the José Martí National Library is carrying out a study that will allow its libraries to be automated in a series of stages. Over time there will be fewer librarians and users untrained in the new information technologies. The demand and requirement for a high level of information services will grow. But as the development of science continues its inexorable growth, and given our mission to contribute to the education and general culture of the community, all forms of literacy training will remain an important continuing activity for Cuban library professionals.

Conclusions

With the support of intellectuals, professionals, volunteers, the teaching of reading and writing to the uneducated and illiterate segments of the population has been a continuing effort in the great educational and cultural work of the Revolutionary Cuban government.

Public Libraries, through their professionals, have offered and continue to offer their support and collaboration directly or indirectly to the literacy campaigns carried out in three significant stages.

The computerization of Cuban society, the new literacy, will make it possible in the near future for Cuba to repeat its triumph of 1961, and to declare the country not only free of traditional illiteracy, but also free of illiteracy in the new information and computer technologies.

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