

### Literacy Campaigns: Past, Present, and Future

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*National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Aspects* edited by Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff. New York: Plenum Press, 1987. 322 pp. \$39.50.

*Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987. 184 pp. \$12.95.

*Theory and Practice of Literacy Work: Policies, Strategies and Examples* by Ali Hamadache and Daniel Martin. Paris: Unesco/CODE, 1986. 232 pp. \$14.95.

The topic of literacy seems to be returning to the top of the development agenda. Since the 1960s, with Unesco's Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), there has been a drift away from large-scale literacy programs for development, if not in the minds of Third World educators, then at least in the minds of development planners in major policy-making centers such as the World Bank, UN agencies, and bilateral funding agencies. Perhaps this was due to the problems of EWLP (described in A. Gillette's chapter in Arnove & Graff) or simply to economists' reactions to literacy as a "basic human right," which may have struck policymakers as not sufficiently linked to development outcomes such as economic growth, improved agricultural practices, and so forth. At least part of the resurgence of interest in literacy stems from the realization that illiteracy is not just a Third World problem; attention to and research on illiteracy in North America and in Europe have been growing rapidly over the past several years (see L. Limage's chapter in Arnove and Graff).<sup>1</sup> The present volumes are primarily focused on the "campaign" and mass education dimensions of literacy. Each volume addresses national and international efforts to achieve greater literacy among adult populations, principally in Third World countries.

*National Literacy Campaigns* is a compilation of 13 chapters that cover some of the best-known mass education/literacy programs and other in-

<sup>1</sup> See also D. A. Wagner, ed., *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World* (New York: Pergamon, 1987); Unesco, "Illiteracy in Industrialized Countries: Situation and Action," special issue, *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1987).

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teresting case studies of literacy in historical context, going back as far as the Scottish campaign begun in 1560. The historical chapters that deal with the origins of mass literacy—particularly those covering the Soviet Union and China—present some of the freshest perspectives in this area. For example, B. Elko begins his discussion of Russian literacy education with the “peasant initiative” in the 1860s, where popular pressure was so strong that, by the 1890s, “literacy continued to outstrip schooling, prompting widespread fear in educated circles about the untoward consequences of ‘unschooled literacy’” (p. 126). He also points out that the quality of literacy instruction was good in that “retention studies . . . [including] testing the levels of reading, writing, and counting skills of graduates five to ten years after leaving school, showed remarkably high levels of retention of basic skills” (p. 130). We see in such reports that prerevolutionary Russia was already making important gains in reducing illiteracy. With the revolution, however, the pressure for literacy became so great that the famous 1919 “Decree on Illiteracy”—which required all citizens from age 8 to age 50 to become literate—made it a “criminal offense to refuse to teach or study.” Contemporary political rhetoric notwithstanding, Elko concludes: “The lesson of the Soviet literacy drive is not a happy one. The Soviet literacy campaign . . . could never have been carried out without the growth and consolidation which had occurred in the fifty years following the Emancipation and preceding the Revolution of 1917. . . . Benefits from the Stalinist campaign of the thirties there surely were, but the costs were also high, and the wastage extreme” (p. 145).

In the Soviet case, as in the cases of the United States, Sweden, and Germany, we come to understand that popular literacy and mass campaigns are not twentieth-century phenomena. Even prerevolutionary China, where literacy rates were thought to be extremely low, had its popular education movements as well as orthographic reformers, long before its contemporary mass campaigns. In his chapter on China, Hayford notes that the estimates of 1–2 percent literacy in prerevolutionary China are misleading because “they defined literacy as the ability to read classical prose and write classical compositions” (p. 149). Revised estimates, using more flexible criteria (e.g., knowledge of a few hundred important Chinese characters), suggest that perhaps 30–45 percent of men and up to 10 percent of women were literate. Thus, E. S. Rawski (cited in the chapter by C. Hayford)<sup>2</sup> argues that literacy “could not have been the bottleneck for China’s presumed failure to modernize swiftly and cleanly” (p. 149) since there were more than enough literates for the available economy to absorb. Thus, the Soviet and Chinese cases, often cited as examples of dramatic literacy gains within a revolutionary context, take on a completely different valence.

<sup>2</sup> E. S. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978).

In contrast to these historical inquiries, the reviews of the better-known contemporary campaigns, such as those in Cuba, Tanzania, India, and Nicaragua, tend to be less insightful recapitulations of government versions of what took place. For example, in a defense of government propaganda used in the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, Arnove claims that "those who object to political propaganda as part of the literacy process are oblivious to the indoctrination that occurs in all educational systems" (p. 276). Many readers will (or ought to) find this statement too facile; not all propaganda is of the same order or of the same severity. Evidence that this is so comes from resistance to most heavily ideological campaigns among the participants themselves. As J. Unsicker notes in the Tanzanian case, "Attendance rates dropped dramatically whenever party pressure was relaxed" (p. 241).

*National Literacy Campaigns* is a valuable compendium of material. Contrasting perspectives on the utility of campaigns are evident. Some contributors claim that campaigns were greatly overrated, that the costs outweighed the gains, and that the incremental gains of campaign literacy were small by comparison with school literacy. Others, such as Bhola, conclude that "adult literacy is inherently progressive, and adult literacy is even radical in its assumption and consequences" (p. 267). While most literacy specialists would like to see themselves as "progressive," the issue here is making realistic and helpful assessments of what initiatives are best for a given policy context.

Freire and Macedo's *Literacy* consists of a series of dialogues between the two authors and an update on Freire's well-known perspectives on literacy work. In their preface, the authors summarize the main perspective of the book as follows: "We call for a view of literacy as a form of cultural politics. In our analysis, literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people. . . . Literacy is analyzed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formation or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change" (p. viii).

But Freire is more cautious in this volume than in earlier works and admits that he has learned a great deal from his literacy work over the last fifteen years since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* appeared.<sup>3</sup> He cautions that "literacy by itself [should] never be understood as the triggering of social emancipation of the subordinated classes. Literacy leads to and participates in a series of triggering mechanisms that need to be activated for the indispensable transformation of a society whose unjust reality destroys the majority of people" (p. 106). We also see a Freire who has

<sup>3</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

been caught in difficult policy situations, such as that of mother-tongue versus other-tongue literacy. After receiving criticism for the “failure” of his method in Guinea-Bissau, Freire blames the “inviability of using Portuguese as the only vehicle of instruction in the literacy campaign” (p. 114). But he goes on to say that “the legitimation of Black English (in America) as an educational tool does not, however, preclude the need to acquire proficiency in the linguistic code of the majority” (p. 127). In other words, like many educators, he would like to have it both ways.

Freire and Macedo see improved curricula, more student-contact hours, and other such “improvements” in literacy pedagogy as factors that only “perpetuate those ideological elements that negate students’ life experiences” (p. 123). Students tend to “resist” this type of experience, and such resistance leads to educational failure for everyone concerned, including teachers and administrators. By contrast, emancipatory literacy “becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (p. 159). The Freire and Macedo dialogues are filled with politically laden prose. While frequent reference is made to social reproduction theory, the authors fail to deliver a sense of what to do in *specific* cultural contexts that are usually *not* those of revolution and dramatic social change. To burden literacy efforts with the need to simultaneously change society is to condemn implicitly those who seek to promote literacy and related development goals in a technocratic/positivistic manner. One might reasonably ask, Does one have to be a revolutionary to learn (or teach) literacy? Perhaps the answer depends on one’s political goals. Nevertheless, mother-tongue instruction for literacy was not invented by revolutionaries, and, as in Guinea-Bissau, revolutionaries do not always take the usual anticolonial stance regarding language of instruction. In spite of, or perhaps because of, such difficult issues, the Freire and Macedo dialogue provides insights into long-standing debates concerning literacy and revolutionary change and will be useful to those engaged in literacy work within a context of political activism.

The volume by Hamadache and Martin was published by Unesco, and it is an amalgam of UN policy positions, quotations, and citations from UN and specialist literature and examples from field-based projects. Despite this rather awkward melange of materials, and the difficulty of finding the author’s voice amid the cacaphony of quotations, the volume is a useful contribution to the field of literacy. Unlike the two volumes reviewed above, *Theory and Practice of Literacy Work* makes little effort to be critical of official stances; basically, it is a book designed to be helpful by summarizing basic Unesco positions, fleshed out with some (though rather limited) research studies and practical advice provided mainly from Unesco-sponsored literacy projects.

Unfortunately, the book contains a number of generalizations that are poorly substantiated by the authors. For example, we are told that the teaching of arithmetic skills can be very important for literacy learning because the former stimulate “psychomotor aptitudes which predispose the future literate to accept a literacy programme” (p. 41). No evidence is provided, nor is there any, to my knowledge, that would support this claim. We are also told that, “since preliterate usually possess well-developed memory, visual and auditive exercises should not occasion any particular problem” (p. 43) in learning to read. Again, no evidence is provided, and, contrary to what is suggested, the available research on culture and cognition suggests that such claims of superior preliterate memory are ill founded and incorrect.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in a statement that looks odd in light of the Elkof chapter on the Soviet literacy campaign, Hamadache and Martin easily conclude that this campaign “demonstrates that ardour and enthusiasm can overcome many obstacles” (p. 15); Elkof (discussed above) would certainly disagree.

Nonetheless, Hamadache and Martin have addressed issues that remain unspoken in much of the official UN literature. For example, while mother-tongue literacy is *de rigueur* in Unesco parlance, the authors are careful to note that, in many Third World contexts, “it may even happen that the populations concerned are themselves hesitant because of the prestige of the official language which is the language of political, administrative and legal authorities and the medium used in formal schooling” (p. 80). This remark is particularly welcomed since, as Freire discovered in Guinea-Bissau, there may be resistance, not just to colonial languages, but to noncolonial ones as well.

The three books reviewed here provide somewhat different perspectives on what “counts” in literacy work, from policy to politics to projects. Missing in these volumes is serious reference to current research on the psychological and anthropological dimensions of who learns what, when, how, and in which sociocultural contexts. This gap in the conversation between research and policy perspectives in international literacy is unfortunate for both sides. One can only hope that the next iteration of literacy campaign volumes will be able to provide such needed linkages.

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Wagner, “Culture and Memory Development,” in *Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology*, ed. H. Triandis and A. Heron (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1980), vol. 4.