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Review of H.S. Bhola, *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences fo the Twentieth Century* and Valerie Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*

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Review of H.S. Bhola, *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences fo the Twentieth Century* and Valerie Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*

Abstract

The "eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 has been adopted as a goal of Unesco and a significant number of its member states. In a manner similar to successful attempts to eliminate certain diseases, such as smallpox and malaria, the eradication of illiteracy is seen as something that might be possible if only a big push could "innoculate" adults along with their school-aged children so that all might be protected from illiteracy for generations to come. Efforts to reduce illiteracy in today's world contain a central paradox: that so much effort has been invested with so little knowledge about how to best achieve success. For example, the well-known Experimental World Literacy Program, organized by Unesco in the 1960s and 1970s, ended with moderate success and little information to use in subsequent literacy programs. After several decades of international attention and financial investment, the literacy rates of most countries are now relatively stable. However, due to population growth, especially in the Third World, the actual number of illiterates in the contemporary world has grown over the last decade. Furthermore, it is now widely accepted that, in addition to illiteracy in the Third World, large "pockets" of illiteracy exist in the industrialized nations as well. For this reason, there has been an increased interest within the scientific community in the nature and functions of literacy, even though there exists a surprisingly small amount of contact between researchers and the policy-making community.

Disciplines

Education | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education

Book Reviews

Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century by H. S. Bhola. Paris: Unesco, 1984. 203 pp.

Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade by Valerie Miller. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985. 258 pp.

Conscious of the need to arouse awareness, nationally and internationally, that the struggle against illiteracy can be won, to demonstrate solidarity with those working on behalf of the thousand million adult illiterates in the world, and to vigorously mobilize the resources and will to eradicate illiteracy before the end of this century . . . (we) hereby adopt this Declaration. . . . [The Udaipur Literacy Declaration of 1982, cited by Bhola, p. 201]

The “eradication” of illiteracy by the year 2000 has been adopted as a goal of Unesco and a significant number of its member states. In a manner similar to successful attempts to eliminate certain diseases, such as smallpox and malaria, the eradication of illiteracy is seen as something that might be possible if only a big push could “innoculate” adults along with their school-aged children so that all might be protected from illiteracy for generations to come. Efforts to reduce illiteracy in today’s world contain a central paradox: that so much effort has been invested with so little knowledge about how to best achieve success. For example, the well-known Experimental World Literacy Program, organized by Unesco in the 1960s and 1970s, ended with moderate success and little information to use in subsequent literacy programs. After several decades of international attention and financial investment, the literacy rates of most countries are now relatively stable. However, due to population growth, especially in the Third World, the actual number of illiterates in the contemporary world has grown over the last decade. Furthermore, it is now widely accepted that, in addition to illiteracy in the Third World, large “pockets” of illiteracy exist in the industrialized nations as well. For this reason, there has been an increased interest within the scientific community in the nature and functions of literacy, even though there exists a surprisingly small amount of contact between researchers and the policy-making community.

Against this backdrop, Harbans Bhola, a well-known specialist on literacy in the Third World, has presented in his book, *Campaigning for Literacy*, a schematic view of the organization of eight literacy campaigns of the twentieth century: those in the Soviet Union, Viet Nam, China, Cuba, Burma, Brazil, Tanzania, and Somalia. Undertaken at the joint request of Unesco and the International Council of Adult Education, the volume is basically an inventory of campaign descriptions that follow a similar pattern: a bit of history, a dose of political rhetoric, a latticework of official organizational charts, and, finally, a very light sprinkling of data on the “success” of the program.

None of the campaigns discussed in the book had satisfactory evaluation procedures due to a variety of real and presumed historical and political reasons. Obviously, the author is not responsible for this lack of empirical evidence that

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would help substantiate claims of “success.” In spite of this dearth of data, Bhola consistently takes the position that real success was achieved in each case, a contradiction that leads to some confusion. For example, Bhola ends the section on Burma with the following: “Unfortunately, no analyses are available of the political, social or economical effects of literacy” (p. 117). Yet later he concludes that “once again the significance of the ideological and political commitment of the leadership emerges . . . [showing] a definite link between literacy and social reconstruction, between literacy and reform, and between literacy and nation-building” (p. 118). As a result the reader wonders how Bhola can come up with this kind of “definite” links when a bit earlier he admits to there being no empirical analyses at all. If this were an isolated error of logic, one could forgive the conclusion; however, there is a consistent tendency to extol the merits of the campaign leadership because they had the foresight (and/or power) to declare a campaign against illiteracy.

Nonetheless, Bhola has accomplished a number of goals. His is the only volume that organizes information about these rather disparate campaigns. He has provided some interesting information on political and organizational differences that were a function of the complex sociocultural context in which they were carried out. The majority, of course, were inspired by Marxist and Soviet ideologies, and thus bear a strong ideological imprint. Yet we learn that the Buddhist tradition of religious literacy in Burma provided a model for socialist reformers and that illiteracy was much lower due to earlier religious schooling. Similarly, we are told that in the Somalia campaign, the prior existence of Koranic schools led to a tendency to memorize letters, rather than to understand what the words actually meant. We also gain a sense of the terrible difficulty of such campaigns as we realize just how limited were their resources. In Somalia, for example, teachers were “for the most part untrained; . . . they were left free to develop their own teaching methods since they had nothing to go by except for the one chapter of guidelines in the primer” (p. 171).

Between Struggle and Hope, by Valerie Miller, is an important, in-depth complement to Bhola’s overview of prior campaigns and, of course, has the tremendous advantage that Miller herself was able to participate in the Nicaraguan campaign. A former Peace Corps Volunteer and rural development advisor in Central America, Miller was ideally equipped and well placed to observe and write a detailed account of the Nicaraguan “crusade.” Again borrowing from military jargon, rural literacy workers were referred to as the “popular literacy army,” and the urban workers were entitled “literacy urban guerrillas.” Miller, with her insider’s knowledge, allows us to see beyond the rhetoric: the Nicaraguans were quite self-conscious about their use of such terms, claiming that such military metaphors were important and held special meaning for those who fought and died in the revolution.

Indeed, in one enlightening interview, Father Fernando Cardenal, overall head of the campaign, discussed with Miller his views on the use of political rhetoric in a literacy campaign:

[An education specialist from Asia] wanted to know why we had chosen the word “revolution” to begin our primer. Why was the content so political? He

suggested that we start with something more universal or neutral like water, emphasizing its uses, its chemical composition. He said he preferred an apolitical approach, but indeed, what he was proposing, in actuality, was profoundly political. . . . Water is not a national problem; it is not a burning issue that brings people together. The word does not touch them deeply nor emerge from their shared reality or history. The revolution, however, the struggle against the dictator, . . . is an intimate part of their past and their present. . . . To use words like water in the way this man proposed denies people their history, their power, their pride. . . . What could be more political?

[Furthermore], on a purely pragmatic, technical level "*la revolución*" was the perfect way to begin the primer. . . . "*La revolución*" contains all five [vowels]. What could be better? [P. 29]

It is this type of background information and human insight that makes *Between Struggle and Hope* so informative and interesting. Here, we discover why the Nicaraguan government decided on a short-term, 6-month crusade rather than the kind of regional, long-term literacy program suggested by international experts: because the government wanted to quickly demonstrate its concern for the welfare of the people and wished to capitalize on the recent enthusiasm generated by the revolution. We also learn of the modest though critical logistical advice from the Cubans, who were the only people to have practical experience in such massive countrywide efforts. Recalled, in addition, are the moving stories concerning some of the 50 literacy teachers who died during the campaign, including six killed by the counterrevolutionaries (*contras*) who tried to sabotage this first government attempt at community action.

In terms of key issues, such as pedagogy employed, training programs used, and results achieved, Miller does her best to be open and direct. For example, Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian literacy specialist, provided some insights to the crusade planners about the need to support neo-literates' use and construction of their *own* words, or, as he puts it, their own reality. While influential philosophically and in terms of international solidarity, one has the impression that Freire's influence was rather small, precisely because logistical issues loomed so large. Training programs lasted only 6 weeks in all, and yet over 100,000 literacy tutors had to be trained. Since most of these tutor-teachers had only 1 week of rudimentary training, it is not surprising that solid scientific results were difficult to determine. According to government statistics, "Some 406,000 literacy students demonstrated their mastery of elementary reading and writing skills by passing a five part examination. From an effective rate of 40 percent, illiteracy was reduced to 13 percent" (p. 198). Here, as with Bhola's material, Miller fails to be as forthright as she is on other topics in her book: What was the exam? How was it administered? How were the various literacy/illiteracy rates calculated; and how was the original 40 percent illiteracy figure determined? One inevitably wonders how it was possible to come up with such nationwide statistics during the Second National Congress, "held to assess the achievements of the crusade," only 2 weeks after the campaign ended! Such speedy "analysis" calls into question the validity of the data. This is unfortunate, since a credible in-depth evaluation is what was surely needed both to substantiate the campaign claims and to provide educators and educational planners with new evaluation guidelines or baselines.

Scientific matters aside, the Nicaraguan literacy crusade provides many insights on the human side of a major literacy campaign. From personal testimony much too long to quote in this review, it is obvious that the crusade had a remarkable impact on people in all parts of Nicaragua and on the tutors (many of whom were high school students on leave from school) as much as on the tutees. Moreover, from a political point of view, the literacy crusade “was clearly one of the most dramatic and popular . . . measures . . . [which] consolidated its power and established its credibility” (p. 213). Was the crusade, therefore, a real success? Miller, unlike Bhola, describes some of the real problems raised by a campaign of this kind: from the economic costs of closing schools for almost a whole year to the fact that new rural literates begin to migrate to cities in search of better jobs to fulfill their increased aspirations. She also discusses the problem of “follow-up”—what kinds of resources are required for neo-literates, and how will they maintain their new literacy skills? These are the kinds of realities of any massive literacy program.

In sum, both of these books are unabashedly optimistic about the overall worth of literacy campaigns, as providing moral, educational, social, and political gains. Left undiscussed is the underlying and critical rationale of all such campaigns, as put forward by Unesco and others, namely, that increased literacy is linked to economic growth. Neither book addresses this question, though occasional allusion is made to economic issues by government officials. The books are complementary: the first provides breadth, while the second provides depth and insight into the human, more personal, side of such struggles. Although much can be learned from these volumes, this reviewer is still left with two questions unanswered: Was it worth it, and, if so, for whom? Government statistics, official pronouncements, and personal testimony notwithstanding, one still wonders if such massive efforts, economic costs, and political and ideological pressures are justified when considered against other policy options (such as health education, agricultural education, or small-scale more specifically targeted literacy programs. Both Bhola and Miller might respond that few options, other than campaigns, are (or were) realistic in situations of revolutionary change.

Still, the discerning reader may question whether a campaign approach ought to be recommended to other countries, whether in revolution or out. Literacy is a high-priority goal that all governments are on record as supporting, though clearly some governments have invested much more heavily in it than others. In addition, it is not uncommon to hear personal testimony, as evoked in Miller’s book, as to the importance that individuals place on their own achievement of literacy. At the same time, literacy campaigns tend to target individuals who are the poorest, most rural and isolated, and least empowered in the society. Government intrusion into their lives may be seen as “liberating” by many individuals, but the history of revolutionary (and nonrevolutionary) politics should alert us to the tendency for many others to be and feel coerced. Naturally, these testimonies will rarely, if ever, be reported by campaign workers or political representatives. In spite of the rhetoric, illiteracy is not a medical problem that can be “eradicated”; it is an aspect of linguistic and cultural heritage. To propose and achieve quick radical changes in literacy is to upset other aspects of the cultural system, such

as ethnic and language differences and even family dynamics (in societies where only men were once the literates). Although policy planners may agree as to the inevitability of such changes, the overall consequences may be more dramatic in people's lives than a 20 percent decrease in national illiteracy rates.

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Teachers' Work by R. W. Connell. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985. 217 pp.

Teachers' Work, by R. W. Connell, demonstrates an important change in the kinds of analyses of teaching that have gone on over the last decade in the critical educational community. A good deal of the earlier work—including, say, Bowles and Gintis's, Sharp and Green's, and some of my own—had something of an element of "teacher bashing" in it. Teachers were too often seen as simply reproducers of the hegemonic culture of dominant groups. This was an unfortunate characterization. It was much too mechanistic and left no space for the inherently contradictory tendencies in both teachers and their jobs. Just as important, such an appraisal of teaching made it very difficult to create an alliance between those "academics" who engaged in such scholarship and the large body of teachers in schools.

Connell's book is one of the surest signs yet that an alliance between these groups is possible *if* teachers are listened to, *if* one searches out the real conditions under which they work, and *if* there is serious respect for the jobs that they must do. This does not mean that one covers over the negative actions that some teachers may engage in. Rather, it means looking at the material and ideological roots of the conditions that may limit teachers' actions.

In *Making the Difference*, a volume that I reviewed earlier in the pages of this journal (28 [February 1984]: 155–56), Connell and his associates sought to illuminate the contradictory connections between schooling and the larger society in Australia (though it was clear from the popularity of the book that its analysis had implications that spread well beyond the borders of that country). They focused on state schooling that was largely working class and on elite private schools. What distinguished *Making the Difference* was its recognition of the importance of a nonreductive account of gender as well as class relations in understanding the lives of students, parents, teachers, and administrators and its perceptive and sensitive accounts of these various people. In the process of doing the research for that important book, a good deal of data were collected on teachers who taught in both working-class and elite schools. *Teachers' Work* is the result.

One is tempted to make this review very short, to simply say, "Connell has got it right." With the plethora of books and research on teaching now being produced, this is clearly one of the best. The book is decidedly antistructuralist. A sense of human agency—of real teachers pursuing real ends in real institutions