

Adult literacy, political participation and democracy

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Introduction

There is a bipartisan commitment in Timor-Leste to the eradication of illiteracy in the adult population, and a national literacy campaign has been underway since June 2007. By the start of this Conference, i.e. July 2011, over 120000 people had graduated from the campaign's basic literacy classes, and five of Timor-Leste's thirteen districts had been declared "free of illiteracy." It has long been argued in international development literature that improvements in adult literacy levels are associated with increased political participation (Stromquist 2005). So, in the lead up to next years presidential and parliamentary elections, it is timely to consider to what extent the national literacy campaign has made it possible for people who were previously illiterate to play a more active role in the political process.

This paper introduces a research project we propose to undertake over the next two years as a partnership between Australian researchers and the national university (UNTL). Our aim is to study the relationship between the acquisition of literacy and political participation in three of the country's thirteen districts. The project is part of a longer term research program on the contribution of adult education to Timor-Leste's national development goals (Boughton and Durnan 2007). By sharing some of the thinking that has gone into designing this research project, this paper continues an ongoing dialogue with the popular education movement in Timor-Leste about adult literacy campaigns, a dialogue which my partner Deborah Durnan and I began in 2004 (Boughton and Durnan 2004).

The paper begins with an overview of the history of efforts to raise levels of adult literacy in Timor-Leste, starting with the historic FRETILIN/UNETIM literacy campaign in 1974-75 and finishing with a brief account of the current national literacy campaign launched by the FRETILIN government in January 2007. The next section of the paper discusses the question, "Literacy for what?"; or, in other words, "What are the purposes of a national literacy campaign?" I review two different and contradictory responses to this question, each of which implies a quite different approach to researching the impact of the campaign. The third section of the paper discusses the relationship between participatory action research and popular education, and sets out some of the research questions we have identified as relevant to our study of the campaign in Timor-Leste. The fourth section of the paper summarises what we already know from international research on mass literacy campaigns. The conclusion raises points for further discussion.

Literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste: A brief history

The first literacy campaign in Timor-Leste took place in 1974-75, under the leadership of FRETILIN, the political party which had formed to advocate for independence from Portugal. As we have discussed at this Conference and during the previous one, this first literacy campaign was inspired by the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the practice of both the national liberation movements in Portuguese Africa and the anti-fascist movements in Portugal. The leaders of the first campaign, the students returning from Portugal known as the *Casa dos Timores* group, adapted what they had learned from these sources to the reality of Portuguese Timor. The aim of the campaign was not simply to teach literacy, but to 'conscientise' the people. 'Conscientisation' meant political education based on analysis of the actual lived conditions of the people who were taking part in the classes. In another phrase from Freire, the people in the villages learned to 'read their world', that is, to analyse their situation critically, and to understand colonialism and imperialism. A key element in the campaign was the use of the concept of 'the Maubere

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people', to describe the rural peasantry and dispossessed labourers who were seen as the backbone of the liberation struggle (Boughton 2010; Da Silva 2011). At the 2009 Conference, Aicha Basurewan and Maria Maia recalled some of their experiences of participating in this first campaign, and the papers at this Conference from Antero Da Silva, from Estevao Cabral and Marilyn Martin-Jones, and from Raimundo Oqui and his colleagues at UNTL are adding new insights about this period.

Following the December 1975 invasion by Indonesia, this model of popular education was taken into the mountains, and continued to be practised in the popular schools and political education classes in the Resistance Bases which FRETILIN controlled, the '*bases de apoio*', until the fall of Matebian in late 1978. This is documented in the PhD research of Estevao Cabral and of Antero Da Silva (Cabral 2002; Da Silva 2011. See also Cabral and Martin-Jones 2008, 156-7). As these researchers have shown, this model of popular education maintained the strong link between becoming literate and becoming a militant in the independence struggle.

During the Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste was considered a province of the Indonesian Republic, and, as such, many people also experienced the efforts of the Indonesian government to raise the level of literacy throughout the Republic. So far, the Indonesian-led literacy campaigns have not received any attention from researchers in the Timor-Leste Studies Association, but we can assume that these experiences have also helped form the understanding of teachers and students about the nature of literacy and how it is acquired. During the 2004 National Adult Literacy Conference, some of the Conference delegates recalled that the Indonesian authorities erected signs outside some towns, including Manatuto, declaring them free of illiteracy, but the evidence of the surveys done since 2000 show that in fact the rate of adult illiteracy remained high during the Indonesian period. It is highly likely that the Indonesian government literacy campaigns, like the school curriculum described in the CAVR Reports, were designed to integrate people into Indonesian state ideology. It is worth noting in passing that the Indonesian literacy program, Kejar, received a UNESCO award in 1982, for having "reached more than three million learners in all provinces of the country" (Napitupulu 1985, 204; my emphasis).

Immediately following the vote for independence in August 1999, some local NGOs formed by members of the student clandestine movement began to revive the popular education-style literacy campaign in rural areas, but they received only minimal funding support from international donors (Nicolai 2004). Under UTAET, most development aid was channelled through the World Bank, and the bulk of support for adult education went into the Non-formal Division of the interim Education Ministry, a pattern which continued after the restoration independence in May 2002. Within the Ministry, the adult literacy programs in this period appear to have been based mainly on programs developed during the period of the Indonesian occupation, though there was a growing influence from new donor countries, including Brazil (La'o Hamutuk 2003).

In September 2004, with the support of Oxfam Great Britain, several NGOs who were part of the popular education network, Dai Popular, convened the First National Adult Literacy Conference in Dili. This Conference heard various speakers, including myself, describe the beneficial effects of national literacy campaigns, with specific detail on the campaigns in Cuba in 1961, and in Kerala in India in the 1980s. There was also a speech by Aicha Basurewan, then Vice Minister for Finance, about her experience as a young student of the FRETILIN/UNETIM campaign in 1974-1975. This Conference resolved that the government should initiate a mass adult literacy campaign, a decision supported by the FRETILIN Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, and the Vice Minister of Education, Rosaria Corte-Real (Gutteres 2004).

Little progress was made, however, until the arrival in Dili of a group of Cuban education advisers at the end of 2005. The Cubans brought with them a method for conducting a national campaign known in Spanish as *Yo Si Puedo* (Yes I Can). This method had been developed by the Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) in Havana, on the basis of the experience with Cuba's own literacy campaign in 1961, and the work the Cuban government had done since then in many different countries of the Global South. The work of the Cuban advisers, supported by a national literacy campaign secretariat based in the Ministry of Education Non-Formal Directorate, eventually led to the launch, in January 2007, of Timor-Leste's second national literacy campaign. The first classes opened in Dili in June 2007, and soon after in virtually every suco in the country (Boughton 2010). As mentioned above, by July

2011, over 120000 people had taken part in the basic thirteen week literacy course, led by approximately 400 local facilitators trained by the Cuban advisers, and five districts had been declared “free of illiteracy”: Oecusse, Lautem, Manatuto, Manafahi and Baucau. A sixth district, Liquica, was due also to be declared free of illiteracy by the end of the month.

Although the AMP government has continued to support the national literacy campaign, it made three significant changes to the original model adopted by the previous government. Firstly, it did not continue with the National Campaign Commission and the Campaign Secretariat, but instead, put the campaign under the control of the Ministry of Education officials, in the Directorate now known as the Directorate for Recurrent Education. Secondly, beginning in 2009, the campaign was scaled up, so that instead of classes occurring in every suco, in some districts classes were opened in every aldeia. This began in Atauro, and then was extended to Oecusse. The idea was to accelerate the progress of the campaign, with the aim of eradicating illiteracy by 2015. Thirdly, there was almost no work done to provide for the ‘post-literacy’ phase which is crucial to the campaign, and which, under the original model, was to involve co-ordinated action by all arms of government and civil society organisations to include the newly-literate graduates of the basic classes in activities which would consolidate their literacy. Recently, however, there has been some attempt by the Ministry to provide graduates in some districts with further instruction via the non-formal literacy program known as *Hakat ba oin* (Pers.com., A. Dealmeida, June 2011)

Literacy for what?

The first literacy campaign had a clear purpose, to help prepare people to struggle for their independence, and to end the rule of the colonialist power, Portugal and prevent its replacement by any new power, such as Indonesia. The campaign manual emphasised the goal of national unity, and promoted the ideology known as Mauberism, the idea that the common people – the popular masses – were united in their oppression. This was an ideology of social transformation, in which the people – *Povo Maubere* - would transform themselves by becoming more literate, in order to transform their society into one in which they would become masters of their own destiny. In the words of the independence anthem, *Foho Remelau*, which the literacy classes learned to sing, the people would ‘take the reins of their own horses’, in order to achieve self-determination – *ukun rasik an* (Da Silva 2011).

This highly-politicised understanding of the role of literacy was carried into the mountains, and remained part of the political culture and tradition of the Resistance throughout the years of Indonesian occupation. However, with the ending of the occupation (and perhaps even before that), a new ideology of ‘human development’ entered the country, bringing with it a new discourse about literacy. Promoted by the international agencies, especially the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO, and by some Timorese education leaders, this new discourse lacked the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist character of the earlier tradition. The problem of illiteracy was seen as a problem for development, as something which was holding the country back from achieving the Millennium Development Goals. In other words, the problem no longer lay primarily in the actions of outside powers, which the Timorese people had to learn to understand and struggle against, but in the incapacity of the people themselves to operate independently and to forge a secure economic and political future. The purpose of literacy became, in this new discourse, improving peoples’ ability to engage in economic activity, and their ability to participate in the new multi-party liberal democratic form of government. Instead of a mass literacy campaign, the international agencies deployed literally thousands of short training courses led and coordinated by international advisers to build so-called ‘functional literacy’ for income generation and citizen participation (Durnan 2005).

The new discourse about literacy was already present in the First National Development Plan and the Sector Investment Plans which guided the work of the First and Second Constitutional governments, reflecting the considerable influence which international agencies gained over educational planning in the UNTAET period and the first years of independence. However, the international agencies would not have been able to impose this new ideology on the government had it not also resonated with views held within the country, including inside the independence movement and within FRETILIN. According to some, the original FRETILIN approach to illiteracy was out-dated and irrelevant in the new circumstances of

independence. On this view, an independent Timor-Leste had to come to terms with the realities of geopolitical power in the twenty-first century, and that meant abandoning the revolutionary social program which had originally inspired the independence movement and informed its mass literacy work among the majority population. It might be argued that this development had begun much earlier, with the formation in 1986 of the CNT (Eng: Timorese Nationalist Convergence), following the rapprochement between FRETILIN and UDT; and was even more evident in the formation of CNRT in 1998 (Cabral 2002). The abandonment of the term *Maubere* to describe the people fighting for independence can be read as a decision by FRETILIN to forgo the revolutionary class struggle led by the peasantry for a nationalist struggle involving all the social forces. Whatever the tactical merits of this decision, in terms of the ultimate victory of the independence movement, the change of discourse or ideology opened the way for a new interpretation of the role of a national literacy campaign, one which was more in tune with international agencies conception of the problem. As pointed out by many comparative education researchers in recent years, international agencies are increasingly defining the education policies of countries of the Global South solely in term of the need to facilitate the integration of those countries into the global capitalist economy (e.g. Moutsios 2009).

Nevertheless, a commitment to eradicating illiteracy can still be viewed as part of a radical social program, especially when it is combined with free and universal health care and the extension of free public education to the whole population. The key question, though, is the use to which the new literacy will be put. Will acquiring literacy simply hasten the absorption of the rural population into the lower ranks of an unequal international social order, dominated by western imperialism, or will it help the mass of the people to continue to struggle for a more equal society? The answer depends on the people themselves who engage in the campaign, not just the students, but also the organisers and local monitors and local officials, and the national officials and political leaders. In other words, the impact of the current campaign will be determined over the coming years, and it depends on how the different social forces within Timor-Leste and externally decide to work. The literacy campaign is not likely to continue the process of national liberation and social progress unless the popular education movement engages actively with it, supporting the development of post-literacy activities which go beyond the mainstream goals of increasing economic productivity and liberal democratic political participation. This requires a vision of post-literacy which includes alternative economic activities based on cooperation and sustainability, and political activities which include critical political education and organised militant activism in pursuit of the interests of both the rural and urban poor. While some of this work can be undertaken by NGOs, ultimately it will be up to the Timorese political parties to capitalise on the gains made by the national literacy campaign to build a wider base for radical social change. This applies especially to FRETILIN, as the historic party of independence which continues to attract the largest support base of all the parties, and which continues to count within its ranks many veterans of the first campaign.

The role of research in popular education

This brings me to our research project, and the relationship between research and popular education. Most research promoted by western intellectuals is positivistic, not dialectical. This means that it sets out to describe and analyse things as they currently appear, rather than to provide the intellectual framework and evidence needed to guide action to change the social structures which produce the current circumstances. The dialectical approach acknowledges that current circumstances must change, but also that we ourselves are products of those circumstances. Consequently, we must change ourselves in order to change those circumstances, even though the extent to which we can change depends on the constraints of the current circumstances. We cannot, in other words, jump over history. We work with the conditions as they are, but we work to change them, and as we do this, we learn more about how to change them. Research is one way we can deepen our understanding of the circumstances we are in, and what potential for significant social change lies within these existing circumstances. This dialectical approach is best described in the work of the UK popular educator, Paula Allman (2010).

Significant social change, however, only comes through mass activity, through the mobilisation of large number of people in pursuit of their demands. This is why researchers who work in the dialectical tradition, which is also the tradition of popular education, engage in a particular form of research, most commonly known as participatory action research, or PAR, for short. PAR puts the researcher into a collective which includes people from the society or community being studied. The researcher brings specific skills, but it is not the job of the researcher to provide the complete analysis of the evidence collected. The meaning of what is discovered has to come through a dialogue with the people themselves. In forums like this conference, researchers can begin this dialogue. But, to become socially effective, for the ideas generated to become a material force, the discussion has to engage with much wider circles, beyond the academics and students and NGO activists who can attend such functions, to the people in the villages who have always been the backbone of the independence struggle. PAR provides a model for doing research in this way, which is why it has been, the preferred method of doing research within the popular education movement, since Paulo Freire first undertook research to discover the generative words and themes for his culture circles (Torres 1992).

Our Research Questions

The research project we have begun to plan involves Timorese researchers from UNTL visiting three of the districts in which the literacy campaign has made significant progress, in order to learn from the people who have been involved what they have gained from the campaign so far and where they are hoping they will be able to go next, with the newfound skill and understandings gained through the *Yo Si Puedo/Los Hau Bele* literacy classes. We also need to find out what the organisers, monitors and local officials have discovered, as a result of their participation in the campaign. Our two basic research questions are:

1. How has the literacy campaign changed the lives of the people who participated and their communities?
2. How can we work together with the people to consolidate the improvements in literacy that have been achieved?

In the way that these questions are posed and discussed, we will be applying understandings we have already gained from other experiences of literacy campaigns around the world. In other words, the new knowledge we are aiming to construct, in discussions with the people, about what has been achieved and what to do next will be built with the people in the communities, but not solely on the basis of what they know and understand, but also on what we know and understand. The relationship between the researchers and the people is in this sense the same dialectical relationship that Paulo Friere described between teachers and learners. Teachers are learners, and learners are teachers, and the interaction of teacher-learners and learner-teachers produces something new, knowledge and understanding of the reality which was not present before the interaction occurred (Schugurensly 2011). It is not a matter of the researchers absorbing knowledge like a sponge from the community, or of the community simply accepting what the researchers know before they arrive in the community, or their analysis of the data. Popular education research is a dialogic process.

Pilot studies

This research project builds on work already undertaken by people in the Timor-Leste popular education movement, including the study which Zelia Fernandes undertook in Viqueque, which was reported at the previous Timor-Leste Studies Association Conference (Fernandes 2010). Nuno Rodrigues recently undertook a small pilot study on Atauro island, interviewing students, monitors and local officials and community leaders about the campaign. Both pilot studies also collected information and data from the Cuban literacy campaign advisers. These pilot studies are now being examined to identify themes which we can use in our wider study. We will also be drawing on the work that I did with Deborah Durnan and

members of the national literacy campaign Secretariat in the early stages of the campaign, and some follow up work we have done in recent visits.

What do we know already?

As preparation for conducting the study, we have reviewed evidence of the impact of literacy campaigns in other countries, including Cuba (Lorenzetto and Neys 1965; Kozol 1978; Abendroth 2009); Nicaragua (Arnové 1986; Sandiford et al 1994), and in India (Karleka 2004). Arnove (1986) provided a useful summary of the impact of campaigns, identifying seven different types of effect, as follows:

1. Reduced national illiteracy rates
2. Increased political participation
3. Empowerment of women
4. Building of national unity, especially between more educated and less educated, and between city and country
5. Improved health, especially among women and children
6. Improved school outcomes of children of participants
7. Strengthened mass organizations

These seven effects found in other countries will help us to structure our dialogues and interviews with people in the three districts, directing us to the areas where it is most likely we will discover some impact. However, our aim in this session is to discuss these with you. Our focus questions for this discussion are:

- Can we expect to find the same effects in Timor-Leste, or not?
- What is the most ethical and efficient way to find out?
- How can we mobilise the popular education movement in Timor-Leste to find answers to these questions over the next twelve months?

Conclusion

Since the 2004 Adult Literacy Conference, we have been advocating for action to reduce adult illiteracy in Timor-Leste. The popular educators of Timor-Leste have been advocating for this for much longer. One of the reasons has been the belief that, by lowering illiteracy levels in communities, especially in rural areas and among women, people would be empowered to take greater control over the development process.

One of the roles of research is to test our theories, and improve them. Before, when we argued that literacy empowers people, it was theoretical, at least in terms of the current situation in Timor-Leste. Now, for the first time, we are in a position to discover whether this in fact happens, and how it happens. But, we can only ask this question now, because of the literacy campaign. The practice was required to test the theory, and to understand its meaning in the context of Timor-Leste. This is the dialectic of theory and practice, of action and reflection. Our Cuban colleagues have kept excellent records of the participants in the national literacy campaign, which makes it possible now to do a rigorous follow-up study. This paper proposes that it is now time to discover whether the people who have become literate in recent years as a result of the campaign are actually better able to participate in development, and whether they can now become more active in the continued struggle for national liberation. In doing so, we will also learn how best to move forward to take advantage of the learning that the campaign has generated.

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