

Inside the Volcano: A Curriculum on Nicaragua

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A Plastic Kid

The revolution in Nicaragua sparked numerous social changes. One of the most significant commitments of the new government was to wipe out illiteracy. In 1979 it was estimated that over 50% of Nicaraguans, especially people in the countryside, could not read or write. As the teacher background reading, **Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade**, points out, the government's solution was to close the schools and ask for a volunteer army of young people to trek into the countryside as teachers.

This lesson looks at the personal story of one of these "brigadistas". The young man interviewed in the reading, Rene Escoto, is from a privileged background, and Rene's choice to join a project of the revolution was greeted less than enthusiastically by his parents. His conscious choice to reject becoming absorbed in a culture largely imported from the United States gives students a more personal look at the issues raised in the short story, "Nicaragua is White" from Lesson 5. This reading also helps students see the religious roots of political commitment in Nicaragua.

Note: As background for this lesson we would recommend Sheryl Hirshon, **And Also Teach Them to Read**, Lawrence Hill, Westport, Conn., 1983. Hirshon is a teacher from the United States who participated in the literacy crusade. Her book is the only participant's account that we've seen, and is filled with wit and insight. We've used the entire book with selected groups of students.

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will consider the roots of political commitment for some young people in Nicaragua, both before and after the 1979 revolution.
2. Students will learn about conflicts between generations in Nicaragua made sharper by the choices young people of conscience faced, and still face today.

Materials Needed

- Teacher Background Reading: **Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade**
- Handout #11: **A Plastic Kid** (excerpted from **Now We Can Speak** by Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé)

Time Required

- One class period, and homework

Procedure

1. Distribute the handout, **A Plastic Kid**, and read the selection aloud.
2. Some discussion questions include:
 - What made René choose to leave the privileged life his parents had carved out for him?
 - What was his understanding of Christianity that prevented him from being a "bystander", as Somoza's Guard killed young people?
 - How did meeting politically active students from other social classes affect René?

- René would have access to many more comforts in Los Angeles than in Nicaragua. Why did he decide to return?
 - How was René transformed by his participation in the literacy crusade?
 - Why doesn't René sense a conflict between religion and politics?
 - Would you have made the choices that René made?
- 3.** Review the two writing choices which follow the reading. As a way of working students into one of the roles, you might interview them as they imagine being either René or one of his parents. Give students adequate time to do a thorough and imaginative job on the writing. Encourage them to read their letters aloud.



Education for Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade *

The women and men who took up arms against the Somoza regime had as their goal not just the overthrow of a government, but the liberation of a people — and after victory in battle, the next priority was literacy. At the time of Somoza's defeat, half of all Nicaraguans could neither read nor write. In rural areas the illiteracy rate was estimated at 75 to 80 percent, and, for women in many villiages, 100 percent.

Plans for a literacy crusade, under the direction of Fernando Cardenal, began five weeks after the new government took control. The Literacy Crusade's goal was to bring functional literacy—reading at the third grade level — to 50 percent of the population, or as many as could be reached. The crusade organizers conducted an extensive examination of literacy programs in other Third World nations — Cuba, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde — and invited the internationally renowned expert Paulo Freire to Managua to consult on methodology.

While method and content were being planned, a village-by-village nationwide census was carried out to determine levels of literacy in each of Nicaragua's sixteen provinces. Efforts were also made to ascertain the availability of volunteer teachers.

Influenced by Freire's methodology, the planners hoped to provide one literacy teacher for every four or five *campesinos* (poor country people). Teachers would be assigned to their own province when pos-

sible, but tens of thousands of teachers would have to be transported from the cities to the remote areas in the northern mountains and the Atlantic Coast forest regions where available teachers were scarce.

A serious problem was how to mobilize national resources for such a large-scale campaign without interfering with production. During the revolution, entire sections of Nicaragua's cities had been destroyed by the punitive bombings of the National Guard. Before Somoza fled, he pillaged the national treasury and left massive debts which the new government pledged to honor. Money to pay these debts had to be earned from exports, which meant production of goods had to be increased.

A clever solution was arrived at. Those who volunteered to work in the Literacy Crusade would be divided into two groups. One would consist of young people not yet actively engaged in productive work, who would leave the cities and live with the *campesinos* in the rural areas and mountains for a period of five months. They would give classes in the evenings and by day they would work in the fields, planting crops, harvesting, tending animals, and helping to increase the nation's productive capacity. These volunteers would comprise the Popular Literacy Army (EPA), better known as *brigadistas*. The second group would be factory workers, government workers, housewives, and professionals who would remain at their regular work in the cities and teach in the urban *barrios* during nonworking hours. These were the Popular Literacy Teachers, called "popular alphabetizers" (AP).

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The volunteers for the *brigadistas* were young people — high school and college students primarily, although some were as young as twelve. Several reasons account for the youthfulness of the *brigadistas*. For one thing, many had fought in the revolution and were committed to its goals. (A striking aspect of the Nicaraguan revolution had been the youth of the liberation fighters — teenagers, or younger).

In addition, the government made specific efforts to enlist young people in order to raise their consciousness about the realities of the poverty and oppression of the *campesinos* in the rural and mountain areas. (Most of the *brigadistas* were from urban areas, and while illiteracy was high there, it was far, far higher in the rural areas.)

The *brigadistas* were the political descendants of the “Choir of Angels” — children who had formed part of Augusto Cesar Sandino’s guerrilla army during the struggle to oust the occupying U.S. Marines in the 1930s. The Choir worked to “alphabetize” the *campesinos* in the mountainous provinces of Matagalpa, Jinotega, and Nueva Segovia, so that they could read Sandino’s literature. In the 1960s this same area became the base for the Sandinista forces — nationalists who derived their names and inspirations from Sandino.

Parental Permission Required

Parental permission was a requisite for minors who wished to join the *brigadistas*. The crusade organizers found that they faced opposition from some middle-class parents who were not supportive of the revolution and who, in addition, had traditional parental worries about their children, particularly their daughters. (Working-class parents were not, in general, antagonistic.)

Parental hostility was met by widespread discussions about their concerns. Campaign representatives held weekly meetings in the schools with parents and

students. Posters, newspaper articles, and TV and radio programs addressed the issues. To allay some of the parents’ fears, it was decided to organize single-sex brigades, and young girls would be accompanied by their teachers and live in dormitories, farmhouses, public buildings, or schoolrooms. Boys and older girls would live in the homes of the *campesinos*. It is worth noting that children from middle-class homes — who joined the crusade for a variety of reasons — usually became committed to the goals of the new society Nicaragua is trying to build.

Initial preparations lasted six months. The Literacy Crusade first launched a pilot project in the same northern provinces where the Sandinistas had originally made their base. Undertaken by the eighty-member *Patria Libre* brigade, its objective was to test a training design and gain practical experiences that would later be transmitted to the other *brigadistas*. The group members also underwent physical training to prepare them for the arduous tasks ahead.

After completing the pilot project, each of the 80 members of the *Patria Libre* conducted workshops and trained 560 more teachers. These, in turn, trained 7,000 teachers. For the final phase, which ended in March 1980, schools and colleges were closed early, releasing thousands of volunteer students for additional training. By the conclusion of the last phase of training, a grand total of 95,000 “alphabetizers” were prepared for the campaign. Of these, 60,000 were the young *brigadistas* who would work and teach in the countryside. The other 35,000 were the “popular alphabetizers,” adults for the most part, who remained in the cities to work in the barrios.

Groups Support Crusade

The Nicaraguan revolution had been successful in large part because of the involvement of the people’s organizations

that had formed in the years preceding 1978. Some of these were the National Union of Teachers, the Sandinista Trade Union Federation, the Organization of Nicaraguan Women, the block- and street-based Sandinista Defense Committee, and the Association of Rural Workers. The same groups now provided the Literacy Crusade with massive logistical support, transporting 60,000 *brigadistas* from the cities to the countryside, supplying them with food, medical care, textbooks, etc. They also provided protection; security was a major concern, because remnants of Somoza's National Guard, which had fled into the mountains on the Honduras border, threatened that the *brigadistas* would be killed.

On March 24, 1980, truck convoys by the thousands left the cities of Managua, Esteli, Leon, Granada, and Matagalpa and fanned out to all of Nicaragua's provinces. Because of the terrain, thousands of *brigadistas* had to march by foot. Some traveled by boat, some by helicopter. Each *brigadista* was eventually outfitted with jeans, a gray tunic, a mosquito net, a hammock, a lantern by which to teach at night, and a portable blackboard. On *brigadista* arrival day, a special service was held in every church of every denomination to greet the *brigadistas* and to launch the crusade.

From the end of March until mid-August, the *brigadistas* followed roughly this pattern: by day, work in the fields with the *campesinos* they lived with or chores around the house; by night, two hours of instruction with from five to seven *campesinos* huddled around a gas lamp. On Saturday, there were workshops with other *brigadistas* — usually thirty in number from the same village or a village nearby — to evaluate the week's work, discuss common problems, and plan the week ahead. For those *brigadistas* who could not meet together because of distance, all-day Saturday radio pro-

grams informed them of news of the campaign and offered advice and encouragement. In the cities, the popular alphabetizers worked at their regular jobs and, in addition, gave two hours of instruction at night; they also had Saturday workshops. Within this general pattern, there were wide variations.

The campaign took its toll: fifty-six *brigadistas* died during the crusade. Six were murdered by the National Guard, the rest were killed by accidents or illness. Today, the murdered youth are hailed by Nicaraguans as martyred heroes, and their faces are enshrined on posters and paintings hung everywhere.

The campaign itself was extremely successful. At its end, some 50,000 *campesinos* were no longer illiterate, and the rate of illiteracy was down from a national average of 52 percent to just under 13 percent. Confirming the statistics are the documented exams and the simple sentences that all *campesinos* had to write at the end of the five-month learning period. As important as the literacy they gained, however, was their new awareness of themselves and of their significance to the nation. Prior to the revolution, *campesinos* had been considered of little or no consequence; but this campaign, a major indication of positive governmental concern, contributed to a new sense of dignity and self-worth.

The influence of the crusade on the *brigadistas* and other alphabetizers was also dramatic. They gained a new understanding and respect for the rural poor — and often, as noted, a new commitment to the goals of the revolution. Participants also learned a variety of skills — life skills as well as teaching skills. All gained a more profound understanding of their nation — and learned that they could play a role in creating a new society.

"A Plastic Kid"

At dinner that evening we met a young man who gave us further insight into the professional and personal changes that so many upper-class Nicaraguans are going through. René Escoto is a young researcher at the Institute for Economic and Social Research (INIES), a new nongovernmental center doing medium- and long-range planning for Central America and the Caribbean. René is white. While color differences are not often spoken about in Nicaragua, we learned that they correlate with differences in class background. René's white skin and delicate European features — not to mention his polo shirt — made us wonder if he were not from a well-to-do professional family. So we asked.

"Yes, the revolution has saved me from being what we call a 'plastic kid.'" he told us. "I could have easily been absorbed by U.S. culture — my head filled with American pop music (not that the music is so bad) or drugs or movies. In my head I would have been living in the United States, not Nicaragua facing the realities of my people — which is uncomfortable."

Obviously, you personally identify with the revolution. How do your parents react to this?

"Not well at all. We argue all the time at home. Sometimes they say that I must choose between them and the revolution. Since I love my parents, this has been very hard on me."

"From my early childhood, my parents have taught me to have upper-class, professional aspirations. In 1975 we moved from Matagalpa to Managua in part because they wanted me to go to the most prestigious private school in the country,

the Jesuit school. Nothing has influenced me more than the Jesuits and, ironically, in the opposite direction of my parents' way of thinking. The Jesuits helped me examine my personal practice of Christianity, as a son, as a member of the school and in relations with others. The Jesuits encouraged me to participate in teaching literacy in the poor barrios of Managua, where for the first time I came into contact with the realities of the working people of my country.

"Following this, we students formed a group to live on Zapatera, an island in Lake Nicaragua. There also I saw how the *campesinos* lived, squeezed by a few large landowners. Everyday we reflected on our experience in light of the Gospels. I became even more conscious of the system that impoverished so many in my country. We became aware that there was no way to help this island in the middle of the whole corrupt system without changing the system itself.

"Young people my age were being massacred in the working-class neighborhoods by Somoza's Guard. We began to realize that as Christians we could not be bystanders, we would have to fight against the biggest power, the real obstacle to a human life for most Nicaraguans. I worked hard to organize a movement of high school students, all from private religious schools. We were a little childish perhaps but it was our first try. Because we were from well-to-do families, we weren't persecuted by the Guardsmen. We weren't really afraid.

"But through this student organization we started to have contacts with public school students who were more revolutionary and more combative than we. Their

courage to live underground really impressed me. We helped these revolutionary students with supplies, safe places for underground meetings, and money.

"The conflicts with our parents sharpened: some of the kids in my school were sons of the highest National Guard officers. They sided with the Nicaraguan people and therefore opposed their parents, not as parents but because of their military position with the dictatorship. This really impressed me and provoked even more conflicts with my own parents.

"My parents were afraid that something would happen to me. My mother searched my room for pamphlets: when she found some, she became hysterical and threw them onto the patio to burn them. Then when the peak moment of the struggle against Somoza came and the Sandinistas called a national strike, my parents decided to take my brother and me out of Nicaragua and leave us with an uncle living in Los Angeles. At first I refused, but I was barely 15 years old. Finally I told them that I would go to the United States but it would be the last time I would give in to their will. I told them that when I returned after victory over Somoza (I knew it was close at hand), I would join in the work of the revolution despite any interference from them.

"So I went to the United States and spent June and early July 1979 with my uncle. I remember watching the television news constantly and seeing the big massacres. I saw young people murdered, good ordinary people assassinated in the barrios of Managua, the bombings by Somoza's air force, the National Guard's murder of the ABC newsman. All of this hurt me deeply. I kept asking myself: What am I, as a Christian, doing in the United States? My activity in the student organization had been phony because when the decisive moment came, I was not in Nicaragua but in another country looking after myself. From this pain was born a greater commitment to Nicaragua. I de-

ecided I would return to Nicaragua as soon as possible and throw myself into the work of the revolution."

What did you do when you returned to Nicaragua?

"First, we formed the Federation of High School Students, an organization for all the high schools, private and public, founded and directed by young people. And then I accepted an invitation to join the Sandinista Youth and began training volunteers for the literacy campaign. I was in charge of four squads, each with 30 student *brigadistas* (literacy teachers).

"Students from public and private schools were thrown together, but for once what distinguished us was not class but who worked harder, who merited more responsibility. This was a powerful experience with me: with my white skin and upper-class origin. I found that other students had expectations about me because of their own color and culture. But the literacy work brought us together.

"Politically I learned a lot by observing different attitudes of the *brigadistas* based on their backgrounds. For example, students from working-class families, from public schools, adapted to the living conditions quickly because they themselves had lived on the edge. But it was harder for them to learn how to teach. On the other hand, the *brigadistas* from well-off families and private schools were able to pick up the teaching techniques quickly — but it was harder for them to adapt to the new living conditions because they were used to more comfort."

What did your parents think about your participation in the literacy campaign?

"My parents put unrelenting pressure on me to quit. They sometimes visited me and couldn't understand why their son was living in such poor conditions. They were dead set against my being in the Sandinista Youth. They said the literacy campaign was communism, that we were brainwashing the campesinos, that my

god was the government, that the government, that the government was robbing parents of their sons and daughters. They didn't understand that we were trying to eliminate the enormous injustices with which we were living. They didn't understand that the first step, the one in which all the young people of Nicaragua were involved, was literacy.

"They couldn't see the overall thrust of the revolution — they just fixated on some errors committed by the government. So this conflict with my parents was the principal problem for me during the campaign. It was very tough for me. Especially on birthdays — mine, my father's, my mother's — when they insisted that I come to Managua. But that was out of the question for me, especially, since, as the person in charge of so many *brigadistas*, I had to set a good example and not go back to Managua for this or that. Imagine if all the *brigadistas* had traveled home to Managua for all these birthdays! It would have meant enormous expenditures.

"Through the literacy campaign my Christian faith deepened. I came to understand the Christian commitment much better, what the Latin American bishops in Puebla called 'the preferential option for the poor.' I began to really identify with the Gospel, with all the words that sometimes seem so abstract, so up in the clouds, so romantic when you just read them in the Bible. I came to understand these words concretely when I was living in poverty with the *campesinos*, when I was teaching them to read and write, and learning how they live and all the things they experience in the countryside. Then I could understand, if I opened my eyes a little, all that the Scriptures teach."

What did you do after the campaign finished?

"I went back home — to the same conflicts with my parents. They put tremendous pressure on me to quit the Sandinista Youth. Finally I decided to

obey them until I finished high school so that they couldn't say I had been brainwashed or that someone was taking their son away. I felt very bad about myself, but it was a necessary step with my parents. During this entire time I dedicated myself to my studies to avoid ideological confrontations with my parents. They had to see that even though for a whole year and a half I was not being "brainwashed" by the Sandinista Youth I still had the same commitment to the revolution.

"Once I graduated from high school, I decided to enter the university, rejoin the Sandinista Youth, and again work in the revolution. My parents objected, but now I had a job working here at the Institute, and I attended university classes so I was at home very little."

Complete one of the following writing assignments:

1. Imagine that you are René. You have just decided to join the literacy campaign and want to tell your parents. You know they will disagree with your decision, at least at first, but you hope to convince them that it is the right thing to do. Write them a letter explaining in detail the reasons for your decision. Since they do not favor the revolution, you will need to explain why you support it; they will want to know what experiences influenced your political ideas. Tell them the kind of person you want to be and why.
2. Imagine that you are one of René's parents. You have just heard that René has decided to join the literacy campaign. You are completely opposed to this and wish to persuade him to abandon the project. Write him a letter explaining your views of the new government and of his participation with the literacy teachers. Describe your hopes for his future as well as your fears and misgivings about the present. Be persuasive.

Note: In completing either of these assignments, feel free to use information you've learned from other sources in our study of Nicaragua.