



Historical Empathy

## Maestras: The Revolution of Literacy in Cuba (1961)

### Historical Context

After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the new government made education one of its main priorities. At the time, many people living in rural parts of Cuba could not read or write. To solve this problem, the government started a major project in 1961 called the Cuban Literacy Campaign. The goal was to help every Cuban learn basic reading and writing skills, no matter where they lived.

More than 250,000 volunteers, many of them teenagers and young women, left their homes to live in the countryside. They stayed with farming families, often in homes without electricity or running water. These volunteers, called brigadistas, taught their students using simple lessons, sometimes by the light of a kerosene lamp. Their sacrifice and service had a profound impact on Cuban education, and many said the experience changed their lives.

Even though the campaign happened during a time of danger and political tension, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, it was very successful. In just one year, Cuba lowered its illiteracy rate from about 20 percent to less than 4 percent. The campaign became one of the most successful in the world and showed how education can help change a whole country. Cuba still has an adult literacy rate of nearly 100%, with a 2021 figure from the World Bank at 99.8%. This near-universal literacy is the result of the Cuban government's strong, long standing commitment to education since the 1959 revolution, which made schooling free and accessible at all levels.

### Connection to Habit

The Cuban Literacy Campaign is a powerful example of historical empathy because it helps students understand what life was like for both the people learning to read and the young volunteers who taught them. By imagining themselves as a brigadista living far from home, sleeping on a mat, and teaching by kerosene lamp, students begin to feel the challenges and sacrifices these teenagers made. At the same time, they can think about what it meant for rural families to finally learn how to read and write whether it was to sign their names for the first time or read a letter from a loved one.

## Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the Cuban government made literacy such a high priority after the revolution? What does that decision tell us about their goals for the country?
- The campaign focused on rural areas with little access to formal education. What are some reasons that educational inequality might exist?
- Imagine you are a 14-year-old brigadista teaching in a rural community far from home. What would be your biggest challenges? What might motivate you to keep going?
- From the perspective of someone in a rural Cuban family, what do you think it felt like to be taught how to read by a teenager? How might it have changed your life?
- The campaign was a massive success, reducing illiteracy from about 20% to 3.9% in one year. Why do you think this large-scale effort was successful in Cuba?
- What role does literacy play in power, freedom, and equality? How might learning to read and write change how someone sees the world and themselves?
- Do you think a similar campaign would work today? Why or why not? What would need to be different to make it successful now?

## Suggested Activity

### Step 1: Set the Scene [3-5 mins]

Briefly introduce the Cuban Literacy Campaign, especially how thousands of volunteers (many teenagers) were sent to rural areas to teach reading and writing. Project the photo of the Final closing march of the literacy campaign (Dec 21, 1961) as you set the scene utilizing the historical context above.

### Step 2: Primary Source Reading [10-15 mins]

Distribute the following testimonies from a letter or oral history from young brigadistas (student teachers) during the campaign:

- Testimony 1: "I sleep on a mat in a small house with a family of farmers. At night, I use a kerosene lamp to read with them. The children learn fast, but the parents are shy. I miss my own family, but I know I am doing something important."
- Testimony 2: "I received a letter from an anti-revolutionary group threatening my life. I knew of another literacy teacher who had been killed."
- Testimony 3: "Armed with just some textbooks and a kerosene lantern, I taught literacy in rural Cuba without electricity, running water, or paved roads."
- Testimony 4: "For me, it was decisive. After the Campaign, I realized that I could aim higher in life. I didn't have to settle for the future my mom planned for me. I could aspire to be more."
- Testimony 5: Griselda Aguilera, the youngest brigadista at age seven, recounted: "I was a child, and I became a woman."

Source: Adapted from "Maestra: A Documentary Film" by Catherine Murphy

Ask students to write a short response to the prompt on an index card or sheet of paper:

"Imagine you are the brigadista who shared these testimonies. What are you feeling? Why is this work important to you?"

Have students use a first-person voice: "I feel..." "I miss..." "I'm proud because..."

### Step 3: Peer Discussion [5-10 mins]

- Have students swap their index card or sheet of paper with a peer and explain why they wrote what they did by connecting it to historical empathy.

# Primary Source

## Young Brigadistas Testimonies

Testimony 1: "I sleep on a mat in a small house with a family of farmers. At night, I use a kerosene lamp to read with them. The children learn fast, but the parents are shy. I miss my own family, but I know I am doing something important."

Testimony 2: "I received a letter from an anti-revolutionary group threatening my life. I knew of another literacy teacher who had been killed."

Testimony 3: "Armed with just some textbooks and a kerosene lantern, I taught literacy in rural Cuba without electricity, running water, or paved roads."

Testimony 4: "For me, it was decisive. After the Campaign, I realized that I could aim higher in life. I didn't have to settle for the future my mom planned for me. I could aspire to be more."

Testimony 5: Griselda Aguilera, the youngest brigadista at age seven, recounted: "I was a child, and I became a woman."