

CATEGORY: NICARAGUA: NOW

CONCEPTS: EDUCATION, revolution, poverty, government, language, art

ACTIVITY: A STORY ON LITERACY AND MAKING POSTERS FOR A LITERACY CAMPAIGN. Illiteracy is a major problem in some Latin American nations. The fact that a large percentage of the population of some areas can neither read nor write is a matter of social, political and economic concern. By learning about the problem of illiteracy students will not only have a better grasp of the situation in Nicaragua and the rest of Central America, but will also have a new perspective on their own education.

MATERIALS: Copies of the reading on literacy
Paper and colored pens or paint for making posters

PROCEDURE: Have students read and discuss the hand-out story on literacy. Discussion topics might include:

1. What is the value of knowing how to read and write? List things people cannot do if they don't have these skills.
2. On a personal level, reading is important. How is it important for the well-being of a country in general?
3. It is said that illiteracy and poverty go hand-in-hand. Can you explain why?
4. It has also been said that illiteracy prevents people from being free. Can you think of ways in which this may be true?
5. One of the biggest challenges of teaching people to read and write is to convince them that it is important. Why do you think some of the peasants in Marta's village might have resisted learning?
6. In the story, Ileana also learned from her students. What does your teacher learn from you?

After the discussion students can make posters to encourage literacy or improved reading and writing skills. These can be displayed in class, or school halls, or even a local library.

VOCABULARY: literacy, illiteracy, Somoza, Sandinistas, malaria, brainwash

RESOURCES: Bob Peterson, "Nicaraguan Reading Program Reduces Illiteracy Rate," News and Views (January, 1981), Wisconsin Education Association.

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. 1989.

Ileana and Marta: A Story of Literacy

Ileana and Marta are two young women from Nicaragua. Until they met in the spring of 1980, their lives were so different that neither one could even imagine how the other one lived. The Nicaraguan literacy campaign changed both of them in important ways.

In July of 1979 the dictatorship that had governed Nicaragua for more than 40 years was finally overthrown. The last dictator was Anastasio Somoza, who had become infamous for his corruption and exploitation of the poor in his country. The new government was formed by a group of revolutionaries, the men and women who fought in the countryside against Somoza's army. These revolutionaries called themselves the Sandinistas, taking the name of their hero, General Augusto Sandino, a Nicaraguan peasant leader who was assassinated in 1934. After so many years of unfair government, one of the first goals of the new Sandinista government was to wipe out illiteracy. In order to do this, they organized a campaign and sent 85,000 young instructors to rural areas for 6 months.

Ileana was one of these young instructors. She was 16 years old and the daughter of a middle class family from Managua, the capital city. She went to a good high school, studied hard, and spent her free time listening to rock music, shopping for clothes and going to movies. When Ileana first heard about the literacy campaign, she was puzzled. "What is 'literacy' anyway?" she asked.

Literacy is the ability to read and write. Illiteracy means that a person can do neither. An illiterate person lives in a world without books, magazines, newspapers, cards, letters, signs, and written instructions. Under the Somoza government 50% of the people in Nicaragua were illiterate. Many people felt that Somoza kept so many people illiterate because without the ability to read or write, the poor could not learn new ideas as easily, ideas such as freedom, equality and democracy. After the revolution, the new government decided to fight illiteracy, which was especially serious in the rural areas.

Ileana became interested in the literacy campaign and volunteered to become an instructor. In order to allow people like Ileana to join the campaign, schools were closed in Managua for four months. She joined thousands of other people, many young, in brigades that would be sent to the poorest sections of the country. After a short period of training she left Managua in a truck full of high school and college students to begin work. They took with them books, paper, pencils, and anti-malaria pills.

Ileana's parents were proud of their daughter for having chosen to go to the country and help the literacy brigade. Some other parents were afraid that their children would not be safe or that the new

government would "brainwash" the volunteers. But Ileana, her family, and most other Nicaraguans were glad to see that the needs of the poor were finally being recognized.

After traveling for many hours Ileana and two other volunteers arrived in a small village. As the truck drove off, she began an experience entirely different from anything she had ever imagined. Ileana felt frightened and lonely as she looked around and saw the small village: no sidewalks, no street lights, strange sounds and smells, and a group of unsmiling village men staring at the new arrivals.

Several women approached the group and welcomed the instructors to the village. The women showed Ileana to a small shack belonging to the Rodríguez family, who had offered their home to Ileana for the six months that she would be working in the village. Ileana was nervous as the family members introduced themselves to her, and her eyes opened wide with amazement when she realized that the one room shack was all the room the family of six had. Mrs. Rodríguez told Marta, the sixteen year old daughter, to show Ileana where she would be sleeping. The straw mat on the floor looked terribly uncomfortable, but she was tired, and if her new "family" could do it, so could she.

Fortunately for Ileana, the hard work that filled her days for the next few weeks soon made her forget her loneliness and discomfort. She awoke at 6:00 a.m. and went to the fields to help with the corn and beans. On some days, she and her fellow teachers would work building latrines, preparing the school room, and constructing a small building to serve as a health clinic. In the afternoons, Ileana and her friends taught the women and children to read and write. In the evenings, after dinner, they taught the men who had spent all day in the fields. When it was time for bed Ileana was so tired that she could only think a moment about how she missed her own bed, the hot shower, and the comfortable family room of her home in Managua.

Within a short time Ileana began to feel close friendship with the Rodríguez family, and especially with Marta, who was her own age. At first, Marta had been somewhat in awe of the young woman from the big city. She knew that life in her village was not as glamorous as life in Managua. Marta had never gone to school because the village had never had one. She had only known poverty and hard work in the fields. Marta, like her parents, had helped the Sandinistas during the war, and when the literacy volunteers arrived so soon, the Rodríguez family and much of Nicaragua finally saw some hope.

One of the slogans of the literacy campaign was "If you know -- teach; if you don't know -- learn." Ileana and Marta soon realized that they both had something to learn. Ileana taught Marta to read, and as Marta became more and more skilled at reading she discovered great possibilities to change her own life and the life of her village. But Marta also had things to teach Ileana: how to plant, care for and harvest beans and corn; the importance of agriculture for everyone in the country; how to make do with what you have; and the importance of sharing and responsibility in village life. In class discussions, Ileana also learned the history of long years of struggle against poverty and dictatorship.

The six months passed quickly for Ileana because the challenge of teaching and learning made her forget the fear and discomfort of the first weeks in the village. She made many friends among the people she taught to read and write. When August came, Ileana left the village knowing that she now understood her own country, Nicaragua, a great deal better. The people in the village were sorry to see her leave, but they were pleased with their new skills. Reading had already allowed them to learn more about farming, their country, and the world beyond the borders of Nicaragua.

When Ileana returned to Managua she joined almost half a million people in a celebration of the literacy campaign. The program had been a great success. The illiteracy rate of Nicaragua had been reduced from 50% to 12%. Nearly 500,000 people had been taught to read and write. In addition, 85,000 young city people like Ileana had learned of the living conditions and history of Nicaragua's rural population.

Ileana returned home amid the smiles and hugs of her parents. That evening she sat down to keep her half of the promise that she and Marta had made to each other: to write letters. Ileana was proud to think that her part in the literacy campaign had made that promise possible.