The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade of 1980
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Background

- Illiteracy is an important social determinant of health.
- Illiteracy is related to poor health outcomes among people, and low productivity on a national scale.
- Triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in July 1979 ends a civil war; infrastructure and economy heavily damaged by the conflict. Over 60,000 people dead and more than $1.8 billion in debt.
- Sandinista government designs a program to reduce illiteracy as quickly as possible.
- Program: Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización Héroes y Mártires por la Liberación de Nicaragua.
- Brief period of peace between July 1979 and 1980. Program designed during this period.
- Program implemented in March 1980. Civil War breaks out that year. Rightist guerrillas “Contras” fight against government soldiers.
- War lasts over a decade, claiming 50,000 lives and affecting the quality of the program.

Methods

Program design:
A census was conducted nationally in order to determine illiteracy rates.
- Census sample: 1,434,738 ≥ 10 years old
- Illiteracy: 722,431 people or 50.35% of the population sampled.
- Eligible for intervention: 592,059 people.
- Phase duration: Two weeks in October 1979

Middle stage:
High school and middle school students were trained in order to teach illiterate people how to read and write.
- Students trained: 52,180
- Once the students were trained they became known as brigadistas.

Implementation phase:
Each brigadista was assigned to an illiterate family. Throughout the day the brigadista would work with the family, and at 5:00 pm he would start teaching them.
- Material taught: reading, pronunciation of words, writing.
- Schedule:
  - First half: 2 hours of class from Monday-Friday.
  - Second half: +2 hours of class from Sunday-
- Duration: 105 days, from March 24th to August 23rd 1980
- Cost: US$20,000,000
- Result: 406,056 people became literate
- Partnerships: None

Results

The program ended on August 23rd, 1980. That day the government declared that illiteracy had been reduced to 12.96%; among the lowest in Latin America at that time.

Impact on health outcomes:
- Literate mothers had fewer and healthier children.
- Nicaragua as a nation experienced a larger decline in birth rates between 1980-1985 than any of its neighbors.
- Malaria eradication campaigns and vaccination initiatives took place at many households involved in the program.

Conclusions

- The program did reduce illiteracy, but it failed to achieve long term sustainability.
- Economic sanctions and warfare limited the government’s ability to design follow up programs.
- Program done at national scale; people in the most remote areas were not reached due to warfare.

Limitations:
- Program did not achieve long term reduction.
- Illiteracy in Nicaragua has grown to 30.3% in 2010.
- Results manipulated by government.
- Low quality literacy: some people declared literate were not able to read a sentence.

Additional studies/recommendations:
- Carrying out longitudinal studies that address the quality of literacy.
- Partner up with external organizations in order to build schools; this would ensure that illiteracy does not increase.