

High School Study Guide
MAESTRA

"This is not just a story about literacy. This story is about hopes and dreams... and about what is possible."

- Maestra Director Catherine Murphy



A documentary by Catherine Murphy
33 minutes, 2012, USA

www.maestrathefilm.org

Available on DVD from Women Make Movies
orders@wmm.com

Women Interviewed in the Film

Norma Guillard Griselda Aguilera
Adria Santana & Ivonne Santana
Diana Balboa Eloisa Hernandez
Daysi Veitia Blanca Monett Gina Rey
& La Familia López

Study Guide for **MAESTRA**

a documentary film by Catherine Murphy

Synopsis

MAESTRA is a 33-minute documentary that explores the experience of nine women who taught on the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 as very young girls. Through current day interviews from their homes in Havana, archival film footage and still photos, we look at this moment and how it changed their lives.

The film begins with archival footage from the UN General Assembly in September 1960, when Cuba announced that they would eradicate illiteracy in one year. They made an open call for volunteer teachers, with a massive media campaign that went all over the country. Interviews, recorded testimonials, and powerful archival footage that took years to compile, tell this story that personifies the hopes and dreams of a nation and the will and courage of the young women who made this monumental endeavor possible.

Cuba of the 1950s was dominated by a staunchly patriarchal family structure. Most of the young women's families refused to let them go to the mountainous regions in a time of such uncertainty. So they entered into an intense process of negotiation with their families, fighting for a degree of autonomy and independence. It was a teenage girl uprising.

The young teachers faced many challenges & difficulties. There were women whose husbands forbade them to study, elderly farmers who could not hold a pencil, and the daily challenges of rural life. There were also very real dangers. In the midst of the Literacy Campaign, the Bay of Pigs was invaded. Although the invasion did not succeed, armed confrontations continued across Cuba. In the Escambray Mountains, six months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, one young literacy teacher was killed along with the *campesino* Pedro Lantigua, who he was teaching to read and write.

In spite of the growing dangers, the majority of young teachers refused to leave, and stayed on in the communities where they were teaching, finishing out the year-long campaign. The story ends with the protagonists talking about how this experience changed their lives and their sense of themselves. They speak profoundly about how it changed the way they saw themselves as women, their notions about what they could strive for in life. And all insist this was the most important thing they have ever done.

Source: www.maestrathefilm.org

Vocabulary

Brigadista: Member of a brigade: a group of people organized for a certain task.

Emancipation: To free from restriction or restraint, especially social or legal restraint.

Insurgent: A person who takes part in an uprising or rebellion.

Literacy: The ability to read and write.

Machismo: The sense of being *macho* or manly; the concept associated with a strong sense of masculine pride with the supreme valuation of characteristics culturally associated with the masculine and a denigration of characteristics associated with the feminine.

Revolution: The overthrow or repudiation of a regime or political system by the governed.

Sexism: Discrimination on the basis of sex, especially the oppression of women by men.

Taboo: Forbidden or disapproved of; placed under a social prohibition or ban.

Patriarchal: of or relating to the male head of a tribe or family

Maestro/a: Teacher

Campesino/a: Farmer

Suggested Uses

Grades 9-12: Social Studies, Civics, History, Spanish

Objectives

- 1 The student will analyze the history of the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961.
- 2 The student will compare and contrast his or her own life, environment and culture with that of the Cuban people in the 60s, both urban and rural, represented in the film.
- 3 The student will better understand the meaning of empowerment, as applied to different aspects: politics, gender, age and make connections with his/her present day situation.
- 4 The student will explore the subject of Literacy in rural/urban areas and will become more familiar with the importance of literacy in general.

Before the Film

The following questions can be discussed with a partner, small group or with the entire class.

- 1 What is the effect of literacy/illiteracy? In what parts of the world do you find greater illiteracy rates?
- 2 What do you think are the causes of illiteracy? Do you think illiteracy is a problem in the US? Can you describe US populations with higher and lower literacy rates?
- 3 Do you know anyone who cannot read or write?

During the Film

The following graphic organizer can be used to jot down notes during the film.

	Historical Facts	Education/Literacy	Gender/Youth Issues	Empowerment Examples
What you learned				

Discussion Questions

Literacy / Education:

Literacy is a fundamental social justice and human rights issue, essential for a healthy and dignified society and a fully functioning democracy.

- 1 What was the Cuban Literacy Campaign? What impacts did it have for Cuba? What is the education system in Cuba like today? What other educational projects has Cuba developed after the 1960's?
- 2 Think about the concept of literacy. Why is it important for an individual to be literate? Why is a literate society important?
- 3 Construct a bar graph comparing the literacy rate of Cuba with 9 other countries in the world. Share your findings with the class.
- 4 What are oral histories? Why are they important? Can you give any other examples of oral histories? Have you ever asked your parents or grandparents what it was like when they were growing up?

Gender / Youth:

The importance of women, early emancipation of children/daughters, cross between elderly people and youth, overcoming paternalism, overcoming machismo.

- 1 Think about the young *maestras* in the film. Some may have been your age or even younger than you! Can you imagine undertaking that type of work? What were some of the challenges they faced and things they learned? How did they grow from those challenges?
- 2 The women in the film spoke of the incredibly transformative power of their experience. One said, "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." Explain what her words meant. What was the role of women (particularly young women) in Cuba at the time? How was the Literacy Campaign liberating for young women?
- 3 Why were some parents in the film resistant to their children's intentions to join the Literacy Campaign? What were the historical and political contexts? What do you think your parents would have said?

Rural / Urban Experiences

Teachers learn about country life, some had never even seen the countryside before this experience. Rural farmers come into contact with young people from the city who bring their ideas and views of life from a different perspective.

- 1 What are the characteristics of rural and urban life? What is their significance in the film?
- 2 How does the social/cultural exchange affect their lives?
- 3 Think about some of the scenes of rural Cuba presented in the film. What did you notice about the daily workload / activities of the people?

Extension Activity

Objective: The students will deepen their knowledge about illiteracy in the world and the current projects to address this problem.

Activity: *Study a specific literacy project and write an essay describing its history, techniques and results.*

(The student can use the Literacy Project's website and to find out useful information www.theliteracyproject.org)

[The Literacy Project](#)

The Literacy Project is an oral history & research project that began collecting personal testimonies about literacy in 2004. Through a variety of media and documentation methodologies, the project is creating an archive of personal stories related to literacy - stories from men and women who have taught literacy to others, worked to implement literacy programs, or struggled to achieve literacy themselves. They are also exploring the history of literacy campaigns and literacy programs throughout the Americas. They are especially concerned with the intersection of race, class and gender as it relates to literacy: who is literate and who is not, and how literacy can be brought to all.

Resources and Links

- About the film:

[Maestra Website](#)

[Video Interview with film director](#)

- About the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign:

[On the Trail of the Literacy Campaign by Timoteo Delgado](#)

[Freedom Through a Pencil, by Sujatha Fernandes](#)

[Perspectives on the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign by Ruth Supko](#)

[Digital Preservation of the Cuban Literacy Campaign, Jessica English](#)

- About Literacy:

[Map of Global Literacy Rates](#)

[UNESCO Page on Literacy](#)

[UNESCO Understandings of Literacy](#)

[Literacy in Wikipedia](#)

[US National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#)

[The Literacy Project](#)

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To participate in the development and creation of further curriculum guide material, please contact us at info@maestrathefilm.org

