In this third book of our Iron Cage series, we look at the return of the idea of Community Schools and what it means in practice during the current neo-liberal ascendancy. Policy wonks, corporate think tanks and education officials can't seem to get enough of them, which gives us good reasons to worry. But there is also room for some optimism here. The demand for Community Schools has genuine progressive support provided they stay true to their purpose. And in the struggle to keep them on course, we get a chance to rethink our schools as democratic institutions, uniting "really useful" learning and community development.

These articles explore both sides of the Community School reality in several Canadian provinces, Mexico, South Africa, the UK and Australia. They give examples of schools as genuine two-way community hubs and the thinking behind them. At the same time, they sound the alarm bells as the human dimensions of community development are sidelined in the rush to impose a business model of corporate development.

Alongside this struggle for community in education, we face widespread closures of neighbourhood schools as part of the continuing financial cutbacks in public education. The good news - if we can organize around it - is that there is now a practical, democratic alternative to closing schools: the school as community hub. The idea is out there. Our job is to shape it in the service of education in schools that are there for all of us.

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Autonomy and Education: The Contribution of Aboriginal Peoples to Education in Mexico in the 21st Century

HUGO ABOITES

TRANSLATED BY RUTH MARGARET LECKIE

As we survey the global wreckage of public school systems and their communities, progressively weakened and undermined by business bottom-line mentalities and free-market fundamentalism, it is sometimes hard to imagine where to look for an authentic collective spirit to counter the tide of all this individualism. The next two articles suggest that in the Americas the example of Indigenous peoples, values and knowledge is less utopian than we may have thought. In the following article, Hugo Aboites, shows how those collectivist values that seek solutions to immediate problems in community knowledge and traditions are being realized through a variety of Aboriginal peoples’ movements and initiatives and are extending to all reaches of the education system. The emphasis is on environmental sustainability, community health and the study of history, all from the community’s perspective. And while the leadership in this thinking may come from the Zapatistas in Chiapas, their insights are increasingly finding echoes in Indigenous and campesino communities across the country. We need to remember that full-service schools that concentrate on the delivery of a variety of health-related services must link their work to environmental concerns and the rich histories and cultures of neighbourhood populations if community development rather than social engineering is going to be the result.
INTRODUCTION

The great historic trends that have built the education system in Mexico are not part of some remote and far-off past. The educational experiences of the first peoples, the system of the colonial period and those of the liberal Republic and the Revolution are all still present today in different forms. The period of profound crisis in which our country (and its education system) finds itself today is the reason why these trends have (re)emerged with such uncommon strength in current efforts to define the future of education in this country.

These days, colonial-style calls for an end to secular education and a return to Christian values blend harmoniously with demands for a commercialized business-oriented education system for the twenty-first century. Together they are attacking the notion of education that formed through the periods of the Republic and the Revolution: that of education as a public space, as a fundamental human right, and as the responsibility of the state.

One example of the many battles that this historic confrontation generating occurred at the beginning of the 1990s when the business sector revealed its agenda to the government, asking that in its education policy the government of Salinas de Gortari “eradicate the bias” from texts and programs …freeing them of the ideological burden that leads students into a sterile struggle of class, ideology and dogmatism.” They stated that education should instead be directed at the “restoration of the moral order and the regeneration of customs…appreciation of the authenticity and deeply-rooted nature of the moral transcendence and religious principles that the [Catholic] Church and other denominations instil in their believers” (Instituto, 1989: 140, 146).

This battle for education, which began at the end of the 1980s and continues today, has also seen a new and unexpected protagonist. Since the beginning of the 1990s, as part of the Indigenous peoples’ struggle for autonomy, a distinct idea and practice of education has emerged on the horizon of Mexican education.

This paper is an initial and very provisional exploration of the significance of this new entry into the field and the ways it is making an important contribution to the possibility of building an alternative to neo-liberal education in Mexico.

PRECEDENTS FROM A LONG HISTORY

The education proposals coming from Aboriginal peoples are deeply rooted in various historical processes that constantly combine and overlap. We have, in the Aztec and Mayan empires and dynasties to mention the most visible, a mixture of practices aimed at preserving and maintaining the great kingdoms combined with deeply-rooted older communitarian ways. Then came the experience of the Conquest and, above all, resistance to the aggressive subordination that attempted to strip communities of their most fundamental cultural references. Finally, the most visible and recent struggle for autonomy and the emergence of concrete education projects represent an entirely new and distinct phase in the history of the presence of the Indigenous people in Mexico.

Precisely because of these foundational experiences, against oppression and for autonomy, the kind of education that is emerging constitutes an important cultural heritage, a point of reference with the potential to speak to all exploited and oppressed groups. Even more importantly, it is an historic educational trend that offers the possibility of revitalizing and salvaging from the current neo-liberal regime the ideas, practices and legal frameworks of the country and its institutions that generated the educational currents of the liberal period and of the 1910 Revolution.

In the great civilizations of the Americas, as far as we understand them today, education was stratified in order to serve the political, ritual and military needs of these empires, held together by an overriding way of thinking based on the need of the collective. Thus, in the case
of the Aztecs, education was divided into schools for the nobility (calmecac), others for the middle class and for the general population. These schools had different subjects and compulsory tasks and there was also a clear distinction between education for males and females. They attended separate schools and received a different education.

The education itself was highly demanding and very broad as it included not only the acquisition of specific knowledge but also the formation of character. Even intimate relations were regulated. Instruction included military and religious topics, but also the teaching of science, especially astronomy and literature. Painting was used to create maps and music played an important role in the relating of stories (Mena y Jenkins, 1981: 15-18; see also Soustelle, 1986:86-87). Another thing that stood out for the Spaniards was the special attention paid to “the rectitude with which the kind of justice system they had evolved was administered in order to lessen the damage done by an offence and maintain the social order…” (Mena y Jenkins, 1981: 17).

The Mayans shared many characteristics with the Aztecs, such as the separation of men and women in education; the existence of specific places for instruction from the age of eight to 20 – in other words the institutionalization of schools; the rigidity, although not repression, of education; the fact that women were not mistreated – a custom that is attributed to the example of the conquerors; the rigorous application of laws. Among the Mayans, young men lived in ‘schools’ called ‘youth homes’ where they played, learned, slept and carried out an intense collective life (Souza de Fernandez, 2001: 117-118).

One of the most important values, concludes another author after reviewing the texts of these youth homes, was collectivism. One always had to put the values and needs of the community before one’s own. All behaviour had to be guided by a collective social conscience and carried out within it. A deep belief that the highest moral ideal was to respond to the interests and needs of the collective was instilled in children. Community solidarity, obedience (to elders) and piety were the basic virtues that guided the lives of children, youth and adults, both men and women. In Mayan thought, all of these things were concomitant. Individualism, impiety, pride, greed and envy are all attitudes that are constantly condemned in the Mayan texts and seen as causing the ruin of the peoples (Izquierdo, 1983:27).

Other authors confirm that among the peoples of Mesoamerica – Aztecs and Mayans above all – there were many similarities in the education of children and youth. They are peoples with very similar histories and cultures who were in important and constant contact with each other. It is therefore possible, at this distance, to think in terms of a common educational heritage.

Escalante (1985:19) suggests that children first received their education from their parents, learning certain skills. Once they reached a certain age, they would attend school. He emphasizes that when the school-age period was over, these societies had ways of continuing the education process. Through ceremonies, festivals and speeches, the broad guidelines for the behaviour of individuals and communities were reinforced. Another interesting aspect of these civilizations, according to Escalante, was the emphasis placed on self-sacrifice. This is closely linked to the idea of balance, an integral part of the cosmovision of these peoples and a factor in social cohesion. “When a man sacrifices himself, he maintains the balance with the other side of the scale that holds daily pleasures…and promotes the general equilibrium of the cosmos by paying back the gods for the effort (sacrifice) with which they have given and give life to the world.” In this vision, those of privileged origins and position are those who “are obliged to (take up) the most demanding disciplines: generally priests and nobles” (Escalante, 1985:19); thus respect for and obedience to authority were reinforced by the example they offered of a life of more sacrifice than others. This contributed to the establishment of very legitimate social leadership.

ARRIVAL OF THE CONQUISTADORES AND RESISTANCE

The Conquest had a profound impact on Indigenous culture, not only because of the trauma of subjugation but also because of the emergence of a culture and practice of resistance to the intruders. In 1525, just four years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the citizens of that city were on the verge of rebellion against the invaders. “Every day Mexico seemed about to rise up”, wrote Bernal Diaz del Castillo. In the end, the rebellion didn’t happen, but the relief of another chronicler reflects the anxiety of the conquistadors at that time: “It was a miracle that the Indians didn’t rise up then as they had the materials, even arms, although they
gave no indication of doing so; but they expected that Cuauhtimoc would send word when he had killed Cortes.” “I saw that they were all so united and connected together and so ready for war that they would for sure come out victorious should it begin; and it would have been like that if God hadn’t blinded and impeded them, and also the friars did a lot…” (Montell, J., 2005:202).

This story repeats itself over and over. As the Spanish advanced across the territory, the Aboriginal peoples constantly put up armed resistance (and this went on in the north of Mexico until almost the end of the 19th century). They would yield, offer gifts to the conquistadores and then flee back to their hamlets to prepare for war. The most important source of resistance was the despotic treatment they received at the hands of the Spanish. “They Christianized us, but they treat us like animals”, said the people of the Yucatan. The Mayans deeply resented the loss of their liberty and the heavy yoke that the whites had imposed on them through the encomiendas (control over land, people and their labour which was granted to colonists all over the Spanish empire (Translators Note). They had to serve and pay tribute to their new masters but their independent and bellicose nature made them ready to revolt whenever they saw an opportunity to win. A priest named Chilam Anbal, who claimed to be the Son of God, predicted a holy war against the Spanish (Montell, 2005:279).

The arrogance of the conquistadores imposed subordination but it also created a resistance that later contributed, through the Indigenous armies, to Independence, to the fight for the Republic and against the Second Mexican Empire.

This double legacy of conquest and rebellion left such a strong mark that, in 2005, when the voices from the Indigenous world explained the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, they used the same language of violent and non-violent irruption and conquest of communities and cultures. The Conquest continues to be the point of reference for interpreting what is happening in the present:

“The globalized capitalists go in everywhere, in all countries, to do their big business, their big exploitation and they don’t respect anybody. They just conquer other countries. That is why we, the Zapatistas, say that neo-liberal globalization is a war of conquest all over the world... sometimes it’s a conquest with armies that invade a country... but sometimes it’s economic, the big capitalists invest money in a country or they lend money, but the condition is that we must do whatever they say. And also they come in with their ideas, with the capitalist culture that is the culture of commodities, of profit, of the market. So capitalism, carries out a conquest, doing whatever it wants, destroying and changing what it doesn’t like... destroying what’s already there in those countries, the culture, the language, the economic system, the political system and also destroying the ways that people relate to each other in those countries (EZLN, 2005:16).”

But practically in the same breath that describes the oppression, resistance appears: “However, it is not so easy for neo-liberal globalization because the exploited people of each country don’t just go along, saying ‘oh well’ – they rebel. And those who are left over and those who obstruct, they resist and don’t allow themselves to be eliminated. And so we see that all over the world those who are the most oppressed are resisting... and not just in one country, but wherever they are... so just as there is a neo-liberal globalization, there is also a globalization of rebellion (EZLN, 2005:16).”

AUTONOMY

One of the clearest expressions of this conquest-resistance pairing is autonomy, not just in its current form, but built over the centuries in a story that is yet to be told. One very interesting study by Gudrum Lenkersdorf about the gobiernos concejiles, or municipal councils, allows us a glimpse into how this process evolved. The author reminds us that the colonial regime tried to establish a system characterized by a highly centralized and strictly monarchical, monotheistic and monogamous order. In addition, it introduced commercial monopolies, official monolingualism and single-crop farming or monocultures... they tried to consolidate a system of state control that would promote exclusive and intolerant customs, vertical structures and practices of subordination, all contained within unidirectional movements in linear time. The contrast with the Mayans could not have been greater since their system was based, at that time, on ecological balance, plurality, reciprocity and a complementary diversity that encouraged inclusive practices, adjusted, according to a circular conception of time (Lenkersdorf, G., 2002:144).
She also writes of the different ways in which the Spanish again and again to subdue the Indigenous communities. From caciques (recruited Indigenous) they moved on to a system of *fisco de doctrina*, or ecclesiastical magistrates, also selected from the communities themselves. Then they used governors, who were a modern form of the *caciques* and finally, the *cabildos*, made up of people elected by the community (but who had to be confirmed by the *Audiencia Real* or Royal Court). They were a kind of “Indian republic” similar to a municipality, but they were to be supervised by and subordinate to the colonial authorities. The system, however, did not work perfectly. Particularly in the Mayan regions, for various reasons, the state’s presence was very weak (for example, there were no officials in charge of overseeing the functioning of the *cabildos*) and this meant that these entities began to evolve into models of increasing autonomy.

The different Indigenous groups elected the people they wanted (not those the friars suggested via little notes), they made their own decisions, and even opened up their meetings to non-members (particularly the village elders), which was unprecedented. This is how the still public character of such meetings was established and how the important role of elders in Indigenous tradition was incorporated into the system. This whole process resulted in the establishment of collective rather than individual authority. It got to the point that the few despairs Spaniards who had contact with these communities felt marginalized from processes they either didn’t understand or were not admitted into. Thus they reported to their superiors that as far as the Indigenous people went, “everything among them was meetings, discussions, councils and mysteries, and nothing but doubts and questions for us.” They were, they said, as if it were quite incomprehensible, “Indians who lived without a higher authority to obey.”

Thus, the Mayan peoples (Yucatan, Chiapas, Guatemala) put up active resistance to the conquistadors using their centuries-old *mulepad* system. According to Gudrum Lenkersdorf, this was the system that succeeded the old single-person, hereditary style of government. After the fall of the dynasties of the classical period, the *mulepad* system, a shared style of governing through confederations, councils and collectives, expanded. The *cabildos* ... of the colonial regime were a sufficiently flexible institution that they could be transformed according to the Mayans’ own traditions... This autonomy – the author concludes – ended in the 19th century... which is why the Revolution of 1910 fought for “free municipalities” and ... the fight continues... into the third millennium (Lenkersdorf, G., 2002: 154-155).

One of the most important traces of this long process can be seen today both in the virtually unchanged community practices and in the language used. It also shows how ideas about education entered into the conception of and struggle for autonomy. Ideas about education are connected in an important way to the predominant role of the community, but without ever forgetting the individual. To educate, in the Tzeltal language, according to Antonio Paoli, means “to help another to become *unico termlinal*” which means that the capacity of a person exists to the extent that the person is unique and irreplaceable in their creativity, and “no one can be capable except in their own unique way,” but this, he adds, “assumes integration, ability to arrive at consensus within the framework of the community. It assumes the integration of two opposites: personal initiative and collective organization; to bring innovation without abandoning tradition” (Paoli, 2001: 54-55). A personal education made for creativity and skill in the building of community. This long and complex process explains why, during the Indigenous rebellion of 1994, ideas of territories and autonomous governments were raised immediately along with, as we shall discuss later, a concept of education that was very much their own. “This style of autonomous government was not just invented by the EZLN. It came out of many centuries of Indigenous resistance and out of the experience of the original Zapatistas. It’s about the self-government of communities” (EZLN, 2005: 9). So right now, in the third millennium, the *Junta del Buen Gobierno* – JBGs (Junta of Good Government) and autonomy (and within it, education) are concrete manifestations of the resistance and autonomy of the last centuries.

In addition to autonomy, this kind of social organization clearly brings together some of the other ideas and practices of the Indigenous past and gives them a new dimension: the collectivism of the ancient Mayans; self-sacrifice for others (‘everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves’); obedience to those who lead, but authority subject to the intentions of the community (‘lead by obeying’ or, as Paoli reports...
autonomy and the natural resources, to do with our territories, not to be told by others what we must do; 2) the wealth is in our territories; 3) self-determination: we want to decide what we want to do with our territories, not to be told by others what we must do; 4) the neglect of intercultural education has contributed to the loss of identity, culture and language and to the fact that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have lost this rich cultural and sacred potential” (Rodriguez, G., 2005: 29).

The growth of autonomy as a key concept can be seen in other Indigenous groups far from Chiapas. Even within the limits of the Metropolitan Zone of Mexico City, in the mega-urban chaos of neo-liberal modernity, the Indigenous community of Santa Catarina del Monte has established a modest but new order by winning a battle against the transportation monopolies that were mistreating and over-charging them. In open rebellion, they decided to block the privately-owned vehicles and create their own service upon which their vehicles were immediately confiscated by authorities “for not following regulations”. The residents then went to the Texcoco municipal hall, accompanied by members of other communities (including Atenco), took over the building, held the officials hostage and closed down highways. The government relented and returned the vehicles and, in a community assembly, a cooperative was formed based on the idea that “transportation service should always be not-for-profit and for the good of the community” (Salinas, 2004: 29).

A similar process of recovering Indigenous and community identity took place in San Jerónimo Amanalo in the mountains of Texcoco. “The community has defended the use of their language, Nahuatl, organized their own transportation and street safety systems and set up committees to protect the forests and water and to organize residents when there are important tasks to be done to benefit the community” (Fernandez Roman, 2004: C5).

AUTONOMY AND EDUCATION

All calls for autonomy and for the recovery of the culture, language and territory of ancestral communities sooner or later end up talking about education. With the disappearance of the Indigenous aristocracy, schools slowly became centres and instruments of culture. So it is no coincidence that education is placed in the forefront of Zapatista demands. “Education is one of the demands of the EZLN – explain two...
members of the coordinating committee of the Zapatista Rebel Education System – and that’s why we’ve been trying to organize education in our communities since 1994” (Munoz Ramirez, 2004: vi).

They tell how they organized the Zapatista autonomous education system. At the beginning they invited the teachers from the state schools: “more than a hundred came... but it was difficult to organize the work with them, not because they didn’t want to participate with us but because they were used to getting paid”. Other testimonials talk of differences with the official pedagogy. More profound were the two radically different conceptions of education: the “official” version and the community one. Carlos Lenkersdorf (2002) illustrates this distance on the topic of individualized evaluation which, from the community perspective, is completely absurd.

Ultimately, they decided to invite “the young men and women of the region. They were students and not accustomed to getting paid.” The participants speak of their first impressions:

“In each community meetings were held to set up a new education system with the promotores, or facilitators, being from the same community. Some of them were chosen and others just volunteered. And we didn’t really know what kind of project it would be or how we were going to do it. When we left our communities we were very excited and at the same time a little afraid about whether it would be easy or difficult. But when we got to the training centre we were really happy to meet the community there and the other compañeros because that’s the most important thing – the friendship and comradeship. Now we know that the schools are autonomous and the idea is to have a school with dignity where the children can learn a lot about the culture and society. People in the communities feel very proud of the promotores because they are part of the resistance. Education, if it’s useful and appropriate, is for the rest of your life” (quoted in Linares, 2000).

Over two years, twenty young people were trained and in September 2000 the classes began. They were accompanied by men and women from civil society or “acompañeros”.

“Course planning was a collective task. There were endless meetings with participants from all the different communities to analyze their needs and then plan courses and programs of study. In the Zapatista secondary school in Los Altos (the Chiapas Highlands), the subjects are language and communication, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, mother tongue (Tzotzil) and production. In humanities the Zapatista philosophy is studied and they discuss the struggle. Our primary objective is that the students who finish school have a different view of life, that they don’t live in an individualistic way, but work for the good of the community and the collective. We want the young people to understand our struggles more and to know who dominates us and who exploits us...After three years of study, we have seen that they understand the reality of our situation and their awareness is raised. It’s not that we come in to convince people about the struggle. What happens is that here they are learning more tools to know their rights and to defend them. Education, without a doubt, motivates us to struggle and it strengthens the autonomy of our peoples...When the students finish high school we ask them, as part of their graduation, to decide how they can help their people. They choose to do agro-ecological work, to teach in the elementary schools, to work in the pharmacy, etc. They all have the obligation and the commitment to share what they have learned with their community. If not, there’s no point in educating them” (Munoz Ramirez, 2004:vi).

In the case of primary education, in the Caracol de Morelia, “the children not only learn to read and write but also, and most importantly, they learn to fight, to defend their environment, to care for nature and to be proud of their culture”. The subjects they study are: production, political education, artistic education, culture, reading-writing, health, sports, mathematics, history and languages (Spanish and their mother tongue). These were decided upon in dozens of working meetings with 200 Indigenous educators from the seven municipalities. When they register for school, each child brings a hen as tuition, so now the promotores have enough chickens and eggs to feed their students” (Munoz Ramirez, 2004: xiii).

By 2005 the Junta of Good Government (JBG) in La Nueva Semilla, which brings together the rebel municipalities of the northern zone of Chiapas, for example, was saying that education was one of the three fundamental aspects of its action plan: “Health, education and agro-ecology” (meaning food). “In order for us to advance, each one of these must be integrated into the others. Without food, there is no health or education. That’s our challenge – to integrate these three areas.” These
are common goals, but each municipality organizes education differently with different projects.

"In the work of building autonomous education, the people are working hard. We place a lot of importance on this. Each municipality organizes to carry it out. We are just in the first phase. We need to improve in order to have a high school. What we do have are *promotores* all over the zone, but many of them are teaching in their own homes or in those of others. In some communities, schools have been built. We call them all 'cultural centres.' The Zapatistas in the northern zone have almost 300 *promotores* trained here. Most of them are Choles, but there are also Tzetzales and Zoques. In the northern zone the *Semillita del Sol* (Seed of the Sun) project is responsible for carrying this out according to the JBG. They report that construction of the Autonomous Centre for Technological Education is currently underway. It will train young people in theory and practice in the context of their campesino reality. The project is supported by two organizations, *Operacion Jornada* and *Foro Internacional Infantil* of Denmark...One man from the JBG points out that the Zapatista teachers don’t get a salary. Some are supported by their communities who help with their productive work as well as with food.... Other communities in the region are using the theoretical education from the SEP (Ministry of Education) but in our autonomous way, we believe that in order to learn the children should work on something productive. This is a challenge to the ministry way. Here the campesino child learns as a *campesino*. S/he learns the theory but applies it to the protection of the environment and the collective work in the fields." (Bellinghausen, 2005: 19).

Education here, as can clearly be seen in the previous quote, is not simply technical training for agricultural work. Unlike the kind of education imparted by the ministry, this is holistic and firmly rooted in the social and cultural processes of the communities. The students in the Zapatista rebel high schools have written, in both Spanish and Tzotzil, a book titled *Habia una vez una noche* (Once Upon a Time There Was a Night) (also published in Italy by the magazine *Carta*) which tells the story of their origins as Zapatista communities. It explains how, tired of the chaos generated by oppression, "the first day of January 1994 Subcommandante Marcos organized his commanders and told them: 'No more of this mess! That is why the Zapatistas took up arms and began a battle that lasted three days" (Bellinghausen, 2005: 46). But the students also, in a clear attempt to recover their culture, "wrote the stories (the Mayan legends, popular tales and the stories of the Zapatista struggle from the point of view of and experience of the students and their communities) in their mother tongue, Tzotzil, which until then had had only an oral tradition."

Among the stories is one about a small pine tree that, like all the others in the forest, had green needles. Unhappy with this, it asked for golden leaves, but that turned out worse for the tree because they were all stolen. So it had them changed again into glass leaves but along came a whirlwind and broke them all and the tree was left naked. So it decided, "I'm going to ask for the leaves I started with so they don't get taken away from me". It's a similar lesson, in its rejection of the need to be different or special, that in the Zapotec tradition is expressed in the saying that "the one who has more is not the richest, but rather the one who needs the least" (Ojarasca: 1).

These schools are also contributing to the development of writing in Tzotzil, which until now had been non-existent. They call all of this "self-sustainable education" because it generates its own cultural products (Bellinghausen, 2005: 46). “Our education – say the members of the Junta of Good Government of Garrucha – comes out of the thinking of the peoples. Nothing comes from outside and it’s nothing like the official education where they don’t respect the Indigenous people or their story” (Munoz Ramirez, 2004: xi). Although they don’t say so, stories like this also have the function of bringing together head and heart which in official education are usually separate. They are recovering the Indigenous educational tradition, based on myths and rituals: “where the message educated, because it went to the heart and not the head” (Marcotegui Angulo, quoted in Poy Solano, 2003).

One detailed and very complete description of these education projects emphasizes recovering the relationship with the land. In *The Education We Are Calling for as Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Zapatistas*, they talk of recovering the “knowledge that our ancestors, the Mayans, Aztecs, Mexicans, etc. had about conserving Mother Earth, given that Mother Earth is what maintains our existence in this unjust world. We are planning this kind of education in order to strengthen the lives of the human beings who live on our lands and territories. This is
the kind of learning that we must impart so as not to be unfair to the earth; “our school studies the environment as a compendium of existing natural, social and cultural values that influence the material and psychological lives of people” (Munoz Ramirez, 2004: xi).

Another important area for the autonomous schools is health: “for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, it is very important to know about health because health is life, health is the ability to analyse our situation as peoples at the social, political, economic and cultural levels, health is part of the holistic education of human beings and, without quality, education that comes out of our reality, there is no mental or physical health. So health and education are intimately connected.”

They go on to say that “the kind of education that we are carrying on in our communities-in-rebellion and rebellion is to educate ourselves to recover, conserve, strengthen and improve of all our knowledge of economics, society, culture, religion, territory, etc; the recovery and strengthening of our Indigenous languages, the conservation of our historic patrimony, the appreciation and conservation of our natural resources, renewable and non-renewable.” They finish by emphasising the importance of the study of history:

“We believe that the study of history in our autonomous Zapatista education is the fundamental basis for the cultural, political, social and economic development of any community. History is the root of our existence; it is the root of our identity as Aboriginal peoples before the Conquest. If a people don’t have their own history, they don’t understand or know their reality. A people who is not told its history, is a people without life; a people who lack that most elemental thing, their history, will disappear...education without history is a murderous education. And that’s what we, the people in resistance in the southeast of Mexico, will not accept. An education system that doesn’t teach our true history will lead to our death, for sure. That is exactly what we don’t want in our Zapatista National Liberation Autonomous Rebel Education System of the Chiapas Highlands (General Coordination of the Zapatista National Liberation Autonomous Rebel education System-Chiapas Highlands Zone, 2004).

The Broader Impact: Indigenous and Popular Education in Higher Education

The presence of a site of rebellion and autonomous Indigenous education in the South has had a national impact in only a few years, especially in post-secondary education. Indigenous groups in different parts of the country have demanded that state and federal authorities provide education to their young people and, under this pressure, they have responded. The idea that there should be post-secondary education for Indigenous communities has started to take root, although the official educational structures are often only paying it lip service.

Much in the way of all current business-oriented education, what the authorities do is to cloak a polytechnic university in indigenista discourse even though that institution (which may well be located in a rural Indigenous region) doesn’t vary a bit from the neo-liberal focus of education – de-contextualized from all social processes except that of corporate globalization. This is true in the case of the Technological University of the Mixteca where, although “many students come from Indigenous families and speak Mixtec, Mixe, Triqui, Amuzgo or Zapoteco [and where they acknowledge that] it is important to recover the original cultures of Oaxaca [they state that] what young people require are scientific and business skills in order to be able to survive in a labour market that is more and more competitive.” The director of Industrial Engineering, himself Indigenous with Masters and PhD degrees from the University of Manchester, explains that the pedagogy is based on the survival of the fittest: “those who are most capable will survive” (Gonzalez, 2005: 23), voicing a very different conception of education than those which have been described above.

A slightly different case is the Autonomas Indigenous University of Mexico, founded in 1999 in Mochichuahui in El Fuerte, Sinaloa. They use methods that allow for more personal and, hopefully, collective creativ-
ity. The program is based on intensive work by the individual student (there are no classes) and they serve about 1,000 students (40% Yoremes from the north of Sinaloa and the south of Sonora; 20% Choles, Mames, Tzotziles and Tzeltzales; 30% Tarahumaras and Seris and 10% Mestizos). They also talk of the importance of “protecting native cultural tradition, but also of exposing students to western culture. At
Mochicahuil, students must achieve at least 80% in English, knowledge to use multimedia as a basic tool and each have their own personal educational plan with the support of professor-advisors" (Gonzalez, 2005: 26).

The Intercultural University of the State of Mexico in San Felipe Progreso, which has almost 300 Mazahua, Otomi, Mazateca, Tlahuica students, has gone a bit further. The president says that the idea is to recuperate the knowledge of the Indigenous communities through diverse fields as medicine, agriculture, law and philosophy. "students must learn a regional language as well as English. It is a cultural project that puts the young people at the forefront of university knowledge, but at the same time values the profound significance of the culture of their parents and grandparents" (Gonzalez, 2005: 26).

The Zapatista project and its belief that education must be appropriate to the reality of Indigenous people have also influenced the most academic institutions of higher education. Thus, in 2005 the Veracruz University was planning to offer two new degrees - in sustainable regional development and intercultural management and facilitation - for the Indigenous zones of the region for four hundred participants from the Huasteca, Otomi, Tepehua, Totonaca, Nahua, Zapoteca, Chinantec, Popoluca, Mazateca, Mixe and Zoque ethnic groups at four campuses in the Huasteca, Totonaca, Highlands and Southern Zones of the region. They want to "find solutions to the severe problems of soil erosion, destruction of forests and jungles, loss of mangroves, pollution and rural production" (Morales, 2005: 32). This initiative is seen as "payment in part of the historical debt owed to the first peoples and to serve as a catapult for recovering cultural and linguistic richness, as well as a way to slow down the massive out-migration because of lack of opportunities" (Morales, 2005: 30).

The Indigenous University of Rayon in Chiapas is a collaborative effort by faculty from the Autonomous University of Chiapas, campesino groups and municipal mayors from the northern region of the state, "because what’s being offered by the public and private sectors does not respond to their needs." However, it is very controversial and has encountered opposition from the state government and the legislature itself. Some of the teachers have been called up and accused of ‘fraud’ (Mariscal, 2005: 32).

In the federal legislature proposals have emerged like those of representative Marcelino Diaz de Jesus (Nahuatl from Xalitla, Guerrero) who says that “Indigenous education programs should include people who have been trained by us, not with a paternalistic attitude, but rather one of self-affirmation, with the right to write in my own language”, he said in an interview (Ehrlich y Zamudio, 2001:35).

The higher education project that is by far the most closely linked to an Indigenous education philosophy is the recently founded University of the Land (Universidad de la Tierra) in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. They grant degrees in agro-ecology, agrarian law and advocacy, vernacular architecture, water surveying and community/collective project management, all from an anthropological and cultural perspective and with a clear commitment to serving a cultural/educational centre for the Indigenous communities of the surrounding area, Zapatista and non-Zapatista.

Finally, there are also examples of education projects that, while not being articulated as ‘Indigenous’, are located in areas with high numbers of people of Indigenous ancestry and which draw on the strong community-based heritage of the region. The Municipal University of Chicholaopan, in the Texcoco zone of the state of Mexico, is supported by the municipality of the same name and by state legislators. This university not only provides education that responds to the needs of the community, but social organizations of the region have a voice in who is admitted to the institution.

CONCLUSION

The legacy of the educational culture of the Aboriginal peoples, strongly linked to a tradition of resistance, is making an important contribution in Mexico today. It is opening up doors and windows and allowing teachers and students to see the future of education in this country in a different way. And this Zapatista-led trend is not happening alone. Other Indigenous and campesino communities around the country have quietly and for many years been promoting education projects linked to appropriate land use at the secondary and post-secondary level. This has been the case in the northern mountains (Sierra Norte) of Puebla and in other areas of the country (see Mata and others: 2004). Most important-
ly, however, the recognition and expansion of the need to establish local, regional and cultural entities is actually being fuelled by the failure of the official business model of education and the hegemonic ideology (pensamiento unico) of the last three federal government administrations. The Zapatista experience also opens up a new panorama for the students and teachers who are fighting for the right to education for all. The right to education is no longer simply something to be demanded of the state. It can be built from below and then be taken on by the state.

All of this has the potential to produce an historic convergence of forces capable of challenging neo-liberal policies. Paradoxically, the same policies are increasingly making necessary, and even facilitating, the growth of grassroots educational projects. What’s now needed is to begin sharing experiences and coordinating efforts. A new relation within the state in the area of education is emerging and, as was stated above, it is no longer just a case of demanding that the state respond to the educational needs of the people. Aboriginal peoples are teaching us that the way to go is to generate initiatives in cities, neighbourhoods and communities that can become part of state policy, but in increasingly autonomous spaces.

Thus, the centuries-old struggles of the first peoples are also making a contribution in the field of education; a contribution full of hope and vision amid an educational context of crisis and lack of direction. Education is becoming one of the most important areas of active resistance as called for in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle.

ENDNOTES

1 The presentation of the documents of Padre Sahagun, for example, gives an account of Indigenous culture and education (Lopez Austin, 1985) as well as the essays about the education of the peoples of the centre of the country (Lopez Austin, 1985; Escalante, 1985; Diaz Infante, 1981, Mena y Jenkins, 1981), an important interest that continues to the present (Souza de Fernandez, 2002).

2 Leon Portilla tells how the gods gathered in Teotihuacan and by sacrificing one of their own, created the Sun and the Moon. But "neither the Sun nor the Moon was moving. The gods then began to ask: 'How are we going to live/The Sun isn't moving!/How on earth are we going to make the people live?/We must revive the Sun!/We will sacrifice ourselves, we will all die.' The gods freely accepted their death, sacrificing themselves so that the Sun would move and the life of humans would be possible. When the Sun finally began to move, the days and nights began again. The people had deserved to live, thanks to the sacrifice of the gods. Thus, humans would be known from then on as macehuales, which means ‘the deserving’ ” (Leon Portilla, 2000:27).

3 In Venezuela, and other countries, the local bishop was still naming university professors to their posts well into the nineteenth century. The student rebels proclaimed to the Argentinian people: “men of a free republic, we have just broken the last chain that even now in the twentieth century has kept us tied to the domination of the monarchy and the church”. They added that “the pain that we feel is for the freedoms that we still lack”. They had no doubt about the importance of achieving the independence of the university: “we believe that we are not mistaken, our hearts tell us so: we are starting a revolution, we are living a truly American hour” (quoted in Trindade, 2001). Curiously, almost a century later, in 1999 the struggle for Indigenous autonomy and the fight for university autonomy converged in the UNAM conflict of that year in which the freedoms of Cordoba were defended by the students: free tuition, student participation (congress), autonomy in the processes of selection and evaluation of students by the university. It was not simply a chronological coincidence. The revitalization of the student movement after 1994 was due to a great degree to the impact on students of the Zapatista rebellion (Aboites, H., 2001).

4 The evolution of university autonomy, especially from the 1990s on, ended up with higher education institutions being converted into higher education "dependencies" (DES) as established by the Program for Improvement of the Teaching Profession (PROMEP) and, as such, subject to arbitrary funding criteria and ongoing centralized and privatized supervision (the testing and certification of applicants, students and graduates). Most importantly, all this has been done in the name of “the responsibility and transparency” of the public universities, the result was to break the link (which was already highly bureaucratic) with communities themselves and to lose the notion of universities as a response to the knowledge needs of communities and many other large sectors of the population. In its place, the needs of large corporations like CEMEX and Banca Serfin Santander and of government entities now take priority.

5 One of these people says that “the teachers from the Ministry (SEP) don’t teach well and they don’t care if the children learn or not. They make them do a lot of homework and read textbooks without asking the children what they have understood, And they don’t allow them to speak their mother tongue.
The teachers punish the children if they don’t hand in their work and they make them buy uniforms. They have to go up to the board and if they don’t know the answer, they make them kneel on bottle caps. We don’t want our children to keep being mistreated. We want them to have the space to think and act and to have their own cultural traditions respected.” In some cases state teachers were kicked out of communities because, “they would get drunk and some of them are informers for the government” (quoted in Linares). Felipe Catalan offers a systematic look at the relationship between the government schools and the community in Los Altos de Chiapas (the Chiapas Highlands) (2001).

Lenkersdorf tells how a group of students insisted on being given the same test as those given in the public schools. This was not normally done in the community schools because after discussing all the concepts and information in groups, “we all knew what everybody knew and we were all aware that there was much that we still didn’t know”. There’s not even a word for ‘test’ in Tojolabal. When they were presented with a problem to solve, the students automatically got into a circle and began an intense debate on how to solve it. After a while they presented the solution they had arrived at. When they asked if that was how exams went in the public schools, they couldn’t believe that each student had to answer the question individually. “We have twenty-five heads that, of course, can think better than one. And we have fifty eyes that can see much better than two” (Lenkersdorf, 2002: 67-69). In cultures such as the Tzeltalas, the idea of meetings and consensus is fundamental: “consensus means that when one’s word is given in an assembly it is seen as a commitment of honour…consensus is reached when everyone has spoken and it all comes together in a resolution” (Paoli, A., 2002: 55).

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