

Why Autonomous Education?

In 2010, the Mexican government carried out a nationwide census. Although the nature and results of a census in Mexico are often controversial to say the least, the 2010 census gave some interesting results, especially concerning education, indigenous languages, and Chiapas in particular.

According to the census, some 7,700,000 people over the age of five in Mexico speak an indigenous language, while almost 16 million people consider themselves to be indigenous.

Although 95% of speakers of indigenous languages speak their language at home, only 45% do so in official schools. Almost one million people in Mexico do not speak Spanish.

In the state of Chiapas, about 28% of the population speak an indigenous language. This includes 475,000 Tzeltal speakers, 430,000 Tsotsil speakers and 220,000 Ch'ol speakers.

Chiapas has the highest rate of illiteracy in Mexico, officially standing at 18%. It has the lowest percentage of people between six and 14 years of age in Mexico that go to school. The average level of schooling achieved by people fifteen years or over in Chiapas is less than 7th Grade.

Clearly, the educational needs of the population are not being provided for by the government.

Education has always been a high priority for Latin American revolutionary movements. From the early days of the struggle against the Batista regime in the Sierra Maestra in Cuba, followed by the successful drive for the eradication of illiteracy after the victory of the 26J Movement, through similar endeavors by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua after 1979, to the current system of autonomous schools in Mexico and throughout the Latin American continent, a great emphasis has always been placed on the provision of education for all and this provides a challenge to accepted forms and standards of what is commonly accepted and understood as 'education'.

Almost immediately after the armed uprising of 1994, the Zapatistas went about organizing education for their own people on their own terms. The needs of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas had not been addressed by the official school system, either through their attempts at 'integration' (providing schooling through Spanish, with school uniforms in the hope that the indigenous peoples would become 'normal' citizens in mainstream society) or by educational reform and the provision of bilingual education.

The bilingual schools often failed due to the fact that the teachers, who generally came from well-off, urban backgrounds, were unhappy about being sent to work in remote areas with few material comforts, and this led to tensions between

them and the communities in which they worked resulting in massive absenteeism, both on their part and the part of students, such that the stay of the 'flying teachers', as they became known, usually didn't last long.

The autonomous Zapatista system of schools, organized within and by the 'caracoles' (autonomous districts), addressed this problem with a radical approach whereby teachers, as we know them, were replaced by 'educational promoters' (*promotores*), selected from and elected by the communities themselves. Although the work of the promoters is often done on a rotary basis, promoters will often stay on in their posts for a number of years. They tend to be young women and men who have completed or have some experience of secondary school, although this is not always the case. They receive no pay as education is seen as a duty of those who 'know' and a right for those who don't. Instead, the promoters are supported with food, clothing and other basics by the local communities. A far cry from the much tooted 'knowledge economy', in this philosophy neither knowledge nor education are seen and sold as commodities.

In common with the general Zapatista approach of 'First practice, then theory', the autonomous schools are a work in progress. The local 'Councils of Good Government' (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*) meet to decide the learning content, the teaching approach and select the promoters. All three are fine-tuned through an action-research approach. Now, twenty years after the uprising, a second generation is going through the autonomous school system, and indeed many of the promoters have been formed there. A system of education from the people, by the people for the people that fully respects their native languages, traditional dress, customs and environment and their group and individual needs is evolving.