

Autonomous Education in the Zapatista Communities: schools to cure ignorance

“Antonio dreams that the land he works belongs to him. He dreams that his sweat earns him justice and truth; he dreams of schools to cure ignorance and medicines to frighten death. He dreams that his house has light and that his table is full; he dreams that the land is free and that his people reasonably govern themselves. He dreams that he is at peace with himself and with the world. He dreams that he has to struggle to [i] have this dream...” – from ‘Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds – A Storm and a Prophecy’

In July 2010, a European Solidarity Brigade visited the Zapatista communities and Caracoles of Chiapas and reported on the current situation there[ii]. One aspect of their reports was autonomous education, which is for the Zapatistas an important part of their “construction of autonomy and resistance to capitalism”. The school is only a part of the education process, along with “sharing and working in the community throughout life”. It is based on “the ancient and fundamental principle of caring for the earth and its natural resources. Food sovereignty depends on the principles of agro-ecology, the rejection of chemicals and the conservation of native seeds”. “Everything we take from the earth, we must return”.[iii]

A letter written by the Zapatistas in 1994 to some schoolchildren in Guadalajara describes the life of an indigenous child in Chiapas: **“For our children there are no schools or medicines, no clothes or food, not even a dignified roof under which we can store our poverty ... For our boys and girls there is only work, ignorance and death ... Our children have to begin work at a very young age ... our children’s toys are the hoe, the machete, and the axe; when they are barely able to walk, playing and suffering, they go out looking for firewood, clearing brush and planting ...They cannot go to school to learn Spanish because work kills the days and sickness kills the nights. This is how our children have lived and died for 501 years”.**

Indigenous peoples suffer from a lack of proper education, in particular education based on their own languages, traditions, customs, history and beliefs. “In the bad government schools they do not teach the language and culture of the peoples. The bad government sends teachers to government schools for two or three days and then the teachers leave without worrying about the children left without classes. They also make them wear uniforms.”

“The bad government didn’t give us our schools, we built them ourselves”.

So the autonomous communities set up their own schools, where “children learn their own language and become aware of their own culture”. They can wear traditional dress. They are taught in their own language and learn their own history, rather than the version of their conquerors. They learn “not to pollute the environment and to care for the forests, because without that there is no life”. “The stories of the older people play a vital role in education”. People can go to school at any age, and children from non-Zapatista communities can also attend.

Teachers are known as ‘education promoters’ because all work together and teach each other, based on the belief that everyone has something to contribute to the understanding and teaching of every subject, so the promoters are learning alongside the students. Promoters receive no salary. They are chosen, housed and fed by the community, and the position is an honour. It is seen as a ‘cargo’, based on the ancient Mayan idea whereby individuals are chosen to provide unpaid service for the good of the community. The cargo of ‘promoter’ is especially demanding; the communities are very poor, and the work to raise consciousness in the communities is very hard. Experienced promoters go on to teach new promoters and so the system grows. “Being in resistance we have severe shortages of school supplies, but that does not prevent us from organizing our educational system”.

The Brigade visited all five regional areas, or Caracoles, and found each area had its regional differences, while being based on the same principles.

Caracol I, La Realidad

The promoters explained to the Brigade that here they have four levels of education, each level lasting as long as the individual needs. The pre-school level is called ‘Wake up’, and starts at the age of 4-5, with songs, games and group activities. The second level is called ‘New Dawn’, the third ‘New Creation’, and the fourth ‘Path towards the Future’.

From the second level, students learn reading, writing, maths, life and environment, languages and history. Classes are held three days a week from 7am until 1 pm, with a break for breakfast. Classes are organised according to people’s needs, so sometimes there is a holiday during the coffee harvest. All classes are open to children from non-Zapatista families.

Education promoters receive two levels of training over six years, in the fifth year they learn how to teach reading and writing to adults. “The promoters do not work for money, but through their sense of responsibility”.

“We have spent a long time discussing and analysing the subject of education. Education is essential for the construction of autonomy, to prepare for the struggle. “It is easy to deceive someone who cannot read”, so classes are compulsory for children and adults, all learning together.

Caracol II, Oventik

Oventik has two levels of education: primary, lasting around six years, and secondary, which takes another three. The secondary school opened in 2000. After completing secondary school, a student is ready to take on the role of promoter, and this is why since 2003 they have had a primary school in every municipality.

The promoters emphasised to their visitors the need to provide a model of education which will meet the needs of the people in the communities. The government schools force children to speak Spanish even though they have no knowledge of the language. The result is a failure of education in indigenous communities and impoverishment of the native languages.

In the autonomous schools, the children speak their mother tongue (mainly Tzotzil in this area), but the students also learn Spanish in order to speak with people from other communities who speak other languages. They believe that the autonomous schools must take on the role of preserving the indigenous languages in their spoken and written forms.

The promoters emphasised to the Brigade the prime importance of developing political, economic and cultural awareness through the development of analytical, critical and creative skills. Studying their own history is extremely important: knowledge of their origins, their traditional culture, ways of living and beliefs, and the history of colonisation and resistance, the history that is hidden in the official schools. The autonomous schools also teach social and natural sciences, rooted in the reality of the community, learning to work the land, and to cook the food they have grown.

In Oventik, schools are open five days a week. Breaks in the school year are known as ‘change of activities’, when the children are needed to help with work at home or in the community. Primary education is compulsory for young children and adolescents, but at present secondary education exists only within the Caracol itself. Each secondary student goes home every fifteen days and brings back enough food to cover the following two weeks. Classes last from 8am to 3pm, and in the evening students do sports, art and craft activities or read. In the future, the compas hope to extend secondary education to all, and to develop a third level of learning. They would also like to offer adult literacy classes to everyone.

Caracol III, La Garrucha

The members of the Education Commission from La Garrucha explained to the Brigade members that their education arose from the needs and demands of the rebel communities, providing an alternative model of education in resistance. This means that education, as part of daily life in the communities, is anchored in the daily struggle. Within all the four municipalities, the main aim is one of sharing, of learning together, of learning from everyone.

Education in this zone has since 2008 been called 'Little Seeds of the Sun', and is being organised on three levels, although only two are functioning in all the schools in the communities. At the first level, children learn to read, write and draw. The second level covers the Zapatista demands, and in the third level texts, reports, communiqués, denuncias, government strategies, 'why we fight', and the construction of autonomy are all studied.

All levels cover four main areas: history, languages, life and environment, and mathematics. History shows how the ancestors cared for the earth and the natural world, and how this tradition must be continued, preserving indigenous culture. They study past and current history, different ways of working, how to save native seeds, and the need to work together to build and strengthen the community and the resistance. Life and environment covers the care and conservation of the land and nature, natural resources, pollution, and sustainable land management. In mathematics the children learn from attacks and exploitation of indigenous peoples.

The study of languages starts with the mother tongue; in this zone four indigenous languages are spoken – tzeltal (the most numerous), tzotzil, chol and tojolabal. Texts are studied in all these languages as well as in Spanish; studies include law, autonomy, defence of natural resources, writing reports and translations.

Schools are open Monday to Thursday from 8.30 am to 2pm, with a break from 11 until 12. There are no exams or grades, and children or adults can join at any age. It is forbidden to hit, punish, or disrespect the children. "Education is a right and a duty". If parents fail to send their children to school they must explain why to the authorities. "Children go to school in order to serve the community, not to go away and work for the capitalists". They hope to implement the third level (secondary) education throughout the zone as soon as possible, at the request of the communities.

There are two levels of training for promoters and two training centres – one in the Caracol of La Garrucha, and the other 'Companero Manuel' Centre in La Culebra, autonomous municipality Ricardo Flores Magon. After completing the two levels, promoters can train new promoters. Four

one-month periods of training are run each year at each centre, and promoters need to study for two years. They work together collectively, sharing their knowledge ready to take it to the community. All are equal, and all learn the same things. “We believe that we do everything for everyone. We have to do it together”.

Caracol IV Morelia

“Education”, the promoters told the Brigade, “is compulsory until old age”, as it is essential for the construction of autonomy. Education begins at the age of three or four and is also available to adults. There are three compulsory levels of primary education, and three more of secondary. Each level takes as long as the student needs. Each child must complete at least two levels of primary education. After completing secondary school, students can become education promoters.

The schools operate through the community assembly, which is where the people choose their own education promoters who receive special training workshops. The community works together to provide for the needs of their promoters, such as beans and maize. Some communities also work the fields of the promoter.

Classes are held from Monday to Thursday. Each region has its own secondary school, with dormitories for the students who often have to travel a long distance to the schools. Every two weeks, the students return to their communities for a two-week period. Classes are in the student’s own language, but at a later level they can also study Spanish. The areas covered are reading and writing, maths, natural history, geography, political studies, traditional history and culture, art and music. In the secondary schools there are gardens for growing vegetables and plants. This system of education began in 1999.

Caracol V, Roberto Barrios

“The teaching is not good in the bad government schools, and some areas don’t have schools at all. This is why, in 1999, each community chose its own education promoters... The promoter comes from the community, and it is the people of the community who decide what is taught”. Now every community has promoters to co-ordinate the work, and every six months they all meet together to share ideas and discuss how things are going.

There are two levels of education. The first is called ‘Little Seeds of the Sun’, and the second is CCETAZ (the Zapatista Cultural Centre for Autonomous Education and Technology). School starts at the age of four or five, with pupils studying three levels. After six years of primary education they can progress, if they wish, to the second level. There are no

comparisons, no tests, no final scores and no failures. Education is open to all.

The CCETAZ has only been open for a year, so the levels have not been defined yet, but there are to be six terms, of which so far only two have been completed. The college is for young people up to the age of fourteen.

Teaching is in Tzeltal, Chol and Zoque, “if we lose our language, we will lose our culture, beliefs and customs. Craftspeople are being trained as their grandparents were”. Young people learn to be critical of the way of life that is being imposed on them, and of the problems of the communities. They are taught maths and history, but also how to work the land, how to improve the harvest. The schools have a small field where they grow corn and beans to eat. They do not use chemicals or genetically modified crops, “because these are the tools of a system which threatens the campesino” They value working in the field so as to have good food to eat.[iv]

Education open to all, with no failures – “We learn as we walk, side by side with our education”

The Brigade’s reports reveal an astonishing achievement. All this from a people living in dire poverty, many of them under constant attack and harassment, never knowing when their crops and houses will be burned, and many of them unable to read or write or to speak Spanish when the rebellion erupted in 1994. They know they still have a long way to go; they would like to extend secondary education throughout, to have more materials, supplies and equipment. In many communities, there is only one promoter, so the older children teach the younger ones. There are no resources to build new schools, but one day, they dream there will be a Zapatista university.

Throughout the process of building schools the communities have been supported by national and international civil society. Groups from many countries including Spain, Italy, Japan and the USA have been involved.

The strength of the system is in the community, the collective way of living and working. Children go to school carrying maize, beans and firewood. They know that if they go to the government schools they will lose their identity, their culture, language and tradition. In the government schools they are taught as individuals, in order to lose their sense of community as the basis of life. “The government teachers don’t teach what our children want to learn”. “We want our children to learn about freedom, dignity, and to value all human beings, both men and women”[v]. This is truly education from below.

An education for the world

The Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Secondary School (ESRAZ), at Oventik, also operates the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Spanish and Maya Languages Centre (CELMRAZ) where students come from throughout the world to study Spanish and Tzotzil in “the context of the reality of the indigenous people in resistance”. All the fees paid go towards supporting the secondary school.

In presenting the project, the statement reads: “To educate is to learn, which is to say, ‘to educate by learning.’ We can educate students –who educate us- so that those of us who are in favour of life can educate each other mutually and so construct those many worlds of which we all dream. We can say that we know how to educate those who educate us, that is why our school is for the entire world and is why we say ‘for everyone everything, nothing for us’.

“This is the form of the autonomy of our people, of our culture, and in this way we can recreate the different languages that have never existed for those who dominate, while our faces have been denied for being the color of earth”. [vi]

[i] <http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/> Early Zapatista school in Oventik, with roof markings to avoid attacks from the air.

[ii]<http://www.europazapatista.org/NOTICIAS-DESTACADAS-Brigada.html>

[iii]<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/07/17/index.php?section=politica&article=017n1pol> Resistencia al capitalismo, escuela para la libertad zapatista: brigada europea.

[iv]http://www.europazapatista.org/IMG/pdf/BRIGADA_2010_folleto_2.pdf

[v]<http://www.narconews.com/Issue44/article2487.html>

[vi]<http://www.serazln-altos.org/eng/celm.html>