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Educational Reform and Democratic Practices in Guatemala: Lessons Learned from the Communities in Exile

Dr. Michael O’Sullivan

Assistant Professor

Faculty of Education

Brock University.

St. Catharines, ON, Canada, L2S 3A1

(Tel) 905 688-5550 ext. 5345 (Fax) 905 641 5091

E-mail: mosullivan@brocku.ca

Abstract

The educational reform provided for in the 1996 Peace Accords, which aimed to infuse the history, language, and culture of the Maya people into Guatemala’s national curriculum, has not yet been implemented. The Pan Mayanist educational reform proponents, operating from a position of political weakness, have been unable to convince successive governments to implement these measures. Consequently, educational changes that have occurred, while improving some indicators of student achievement, do not address the issue of the cultural components that constitute the essential ingredients of an educational reform *from a Maya perspective*. Faced with this situation, local Maya communities, frequently with the support of Maya organizations of civil society, are creating instances of *local power* where education from a Maya perspective is being implemented in local schools, with or without Ministry collaboration.

Introduction

Democracy and education are directly linked to the actions of social movements. What is meant by democracy as it relates to education is always contested, and this is especially true with respect to publically funded education. If popular movements do not take up the issue of what kind of education they want for their children, then decision-makers in Ministries of Education are free to define those issues following a bureaucratic and political imperative that may very well not represent the self-perceived interests of large sectors of the complex demographic that makes up the national community. The risk of curricular and pedagogic exclusion in the absence of the effective presence of alternative perspectives is particularly acute in multicultural societies, or societies

that are sharply class-divided. This is no less true in Guatemala than in any other ethnically and socio-economically diverse society. Consequently, this paper presumes that the issue of providing an *education from a Maya perspective* in Guatemala must be understood within the framework of the aspirations of the Maya people as articulated in the 1996 Peace Accords, and subsequently in the report of the Comisión Paritaria para la Reforma Educativa (COPARE Commission, see below) for an education system that reflects and respects their knowledge, history, language and culture. In a country where the Maya people represent roughly 50% of the national population, the provision of accessible and culturally relevant education must be considered a basic democratic right.¹



Prologue: Repression and Resistance in Santiago, Atitlán: The Symbolic Beginning of Community Based Struggle for Democracy in Guatemala

The prologue to this story occurred in the early days of December, 1990 in the Maya municipality of Santiago, Atitlán.² The villages around Lake Atitlán, in the Department of Sololá, had been long victimized by the violence that characterized the counter-insurgency strategy of the army during the 1970s and 80s. The guerrilla was active in the area and the Guatemalan army had a heavy handed presence which led to the death of many civilians who, rightly or wrongly, were considered to be sympathizers of the insurgency.

On December 1, 1990 a small group of men dressed in civilian clothes came to the home of a 19 year old local resident and attempted to forcibly take him away. Neighbors, attracted by the shouts for help, rushed to the house and thwarted the kidnap attempt. In the ensuing confusion, shots were fired and one neighbor was wounded in the leg. None of the perpetrators managed to escape. Upon capture by the neighbors the assailants were identified as being soldiers from the local garrison, located 2 kilometers from town. In due course, a military patrol arrived and freed their companions at gunpoint.

The local people, now about 200 in number, wanted the perpetrators of the attempted kidnapping returned to the municipal offices; they went to the outgoing Mayor, who refused to get involved. Undeterred by this official indifference, the people convened a public meeting in the traditional fashion by ringing the bells of the local Catholic Church. Soon thousands of people had converged upon the town center. It was now December 2. Those assembled, numbering in the thousands, condemned the kidnap attempt and denounced the more than 10 years of violence to which the community had been subjected at the hands of the local military unit. The meeting then took the decision to march on the military base and demand an explanation for the attempted kidnapping. According

to eye-witness accounts, some 15,000 people – men, women and children – carrying improvised white banners, walked the two kilometers to the base. They demanded that the garrison commander appear before them to hear their complaints. Instead of dialogue, they were met with gunfire, at first aimed over their heads but soon aimed directly at them. Within minutes 12 lay dead and 23 were wounded. One of the wounded would subsequently die as well.

In the past, as was the case for example after the massacre in 1978 at Panzos, under such circumstances, and faced with such opposition, the army would have occupied the entire area and eliminated the leaders, real and presumed, of the protests. This time, however, they did nothing as the community swung into action. Within a few days, the community convened a second mass meeting, which was attended by Guatemala's national Human Rights Ombudsman, a post which had been created as part of Guatemala's obligations under the Central American peace process. His presence was very significant, because in the past the victims of such military repression received no support from any national official.

Four demands were made at that mass meeting and were presented to the government. These demands were that

- there be an investigation of the massacre;
 - those responsible for the massacre be punished;
 - the army withdraw from the area; and
 - from that moment the local population would assume the responsibility for its own security.
- Thousands of people signed the declaration that was approved at the meeting, an unimaginably courageous act in Guatemala in 1990.

Significantly, the Emergency Committee that had been formed to co-ordinate the community's response to the situation also demanded that the guerrilla forces of the insurgent Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) cease operating in the



territory of the municipality, these operations in the area provided the excuse for the military to be in the community in the first place.

In what constituted a revival of the national civic movement which had been crushed over the previous decade and a half, the people of Santiago Atitlán received massive support from popular organizations, development agencies, trade unions, churches, political parties, and national and international human rights groups. The events of Santiago Atitlán led to the first real opening for the organizations of civil society in Guatemala for many years.

The overwhelming national and international repudiation of these events, coupled with a mass protest in Guatemala City, convinced President Cerezo, who had originally condoned the military's action, to back down. As a result, the army did withdraw from the base, several low ranking officials were convicted and sentenced to long jail terms for their involvement in the massacre of December 2, and the local community took over the duty of policing the municipality.

The implications of the events of December 1 and 2, 1990 and the resulting mobilization were significant, in a symbolic sense, for the country as a whole. For the residents of Santiago Atitlán, these events constituted the beginning of a process of demilitarizing the municipality and constructing a form of *local power* that was autonomous from the state. The events represented the first setback for the military at the hands, not of their armed adversaries, but of unarmed civilians bearing banners and backed both by a national civic movement unafraid to take a stand, and by international church and solidarity organizations. In short, a national civic movement was awakened and emboldened.

Santiago Atitlán does not figure in the communities included in this article, but no study of the process of local power and democracy in Guatemala in the post-conflict era would be complete without recognizing

that much of what is occurring in many communities in Guatemala today started, at least symbolically, in that one municipality on December 2, 1990. On that day, the people said *basta*, enough, and marched in their thousands to a military base, the occupants of which had for so long sown terror in their community, and demanded the basic democratic right to live in peace.

Promising Beginnings/Long Term Frustrations: The Might Have Beens

The period of time between these events in late 1990 and the signing, almost exactly six years later, of the Peace Accords that formally ended the 36 year civil war, were characterized by protracted negotiations between the Government of Guatemala and the URNG, their armed opponents (Jonas, 2000). December 28, 1996, the day the final Peace Accord was signed, was arguably the high point in the contemporary struggle for democracy and social justice in Guatemala.

Had they been implemented, the provisions of the Peace Accords would have initiated a transformation of Guatemalan society. The URNG successfully negotiated provisions designed to bring about the creation of a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and social democratic Guatemala (Jonas, 2000; Warren, 1998). The most significant provisions relate to the socio-economic and cultural marginalization of the Maya people. It would have been difficult to believe, witnessing the euphoria of the celebrations on that long awaited December day, that in less than 3 years the promise that the Peace Accords represented would lie in tatters. On May 16, 1999, contrary to all predictions, a referendum which, had it been approved, would have incorporated many of the provisions of the Peace Accords into the country's constitution, was rejected by the electorate. The defeat was all the more stunning because less than 20% of registered voters cast a ballot in the referendum, a situation which clearly demonstrated the inability of the Maya leadership to mobilize its social base on behalf of an



outcome so unambiguously in the collective interests of the Maya people (Jonas, 2000). This setback was followed the next year by the election of Alfonso Portillo to the presidency. Portillo was the candidate of what Jonas refers to as the *peace resisters*, who supported the political party of former military dictator, General Rios Montt.

Nor were the Guatemalan Maya alone in suffering setbacks to their aspirations, despite some “promising beginnings” (Stavenhagen, 2002). Stavenhagen notes that in the 1980s and 1990s, provisions which guaranteed aboriginal rights were included in the constitutions of a number of Latin American countries.³ However, as welcome as these constitutional amendments were as symbolic gestures, the practical significance of those guarantees is called into question given that they “are not being implemented as they should be” (Stavenhagen, 2002, p. 33). Stavenhagen notes that after these early constitutional changes were approved, “Indians (sic) and their allies have not been able to set themselves clear short and medium term objectives, nor have they been able to develop an effective political strategy to achieve their aims” (p. 34). Stavenhagen specifically cites the defeat of the constitutional reform package in Guatemala by way of example (p. 34), but he could have also cited the failure to implement the COPARE educational reform.

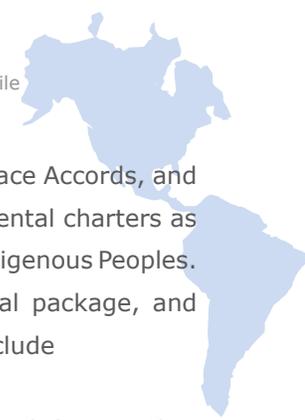
This educational reform was provided for in the Peace Accords. The resulting COPARE Commission was established in early 1997 to “design the reform of the educational system which takes into account the content of the Peace Accords” (COPARE, 1998, p. 11). Specifically, in the opinion of former deputy minister of education Manuel Salazar, the educational reform had two orientations: “... modernization with decentralization (of educational services) ... (and incorporating into the system of education) ... new concepts of the identity of Guatemala as a nation and the identity of the peoples that make it up ...” (Interview with Manuel Salazar, July 28, 2000). There were 10 commissioners, five from the government

and five from civil society, including Demetrio Cojtí, a prominent Pan Maya intellectual and subsequent deputy minister of education, and Pedro Guorón, an employee of PRODESSA/ESEDIR, the two NGOs that figure centrally in the case study reported below. The Commissioners produced a report that outlined 11 “areas of transformation,” the details for which were to be worked out by a follow-up Commission and implemented by 2008. The required details were subsequently provided in a timely fashion; however, the implementation was never begun, much less achieved by the target date.

Neoliberalism, the Minimalist State, and Non Government Organizations

To describe the Guatemalan state as neoliberal is hardly controversial. The neoliberal state is one which “privileges the individual and holds the market to be the guarantor of social good” (Gill, cited by Postero, 2007, p. 15). While many former *social welfare states* of the industrialized world (e.g., Canada and the US in the Americas) and some of the more prosperous Latin American states (e.g., Brazil and Chile) transitioned from welfarism to neoliberalism in the late 20th century, the lesser developed countries of the region, including Guatemala, which never achieved the status of social welfare states, in effect found an ideology which corresponded to their socio-political realities. States operating within the neoliberal framework are not anxious to extend the provision of social services. On the contrary, such a state, much like the common practice now current in the industrialized nations, is more than willing to allow the private sector and community organizations to deliver services that had previously been considered the responsibility of the state. In this neoliberal model of service delivery, the government

... encourage[s] a specific form of civil society participation intended to make the economic system run more efficiently with less conflict. Rather than fighting the national government



over large issues of resource allocation, civil society organizations [are] encouraged to engage in decisions over small development projects at the local level, with limited or shared funding (Postero, 2007, p. 16).

Arguably, creating spaces for local control over community development is a two-edged sword from the point of view of both the state and civil society. On the one hand, such a strategy can release the state from the obligation (and the political pressure) to provide needed social services. In passing this responsibility over to civil society, the local organizations become dependent upon the state, or on international agencies, for operating funds. At the same time, this model provides the potential for granting a measure of local power and autonomy to communities which, in turn, provides the population with what could well be their first opportunity to experience democracy by making decisions about community development and managing resources that affect their lives. The case study presented below of the Communities in Exile provides an excellent example of the emergence of strong local leadership where the communities, left to their own devices, had to take charge in order to survive. Such downloading of the provision of these services can, in the best of circumstances, become a school for leadership training and local empowerment or, conversely, it can become a trap for once independent organizations and a sinecure for a new strata of so-called “popular” bureaucrats, including Hale’s (2006) *indio permitido*.

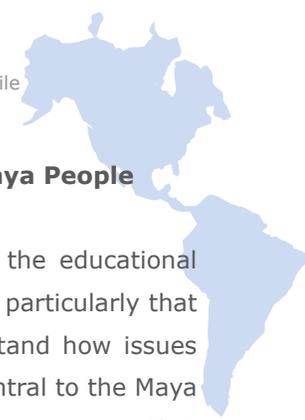
Any collaboration that involves a relatively strong state and comparatively weak partners involves risk, most notably the danger of co-optation. The Guatemalan state, according to Hale (2002), has a very conscious strategy in this regard, which he refers to as the “minimum cultural package.” The contents of this minimal package of cultural rights are, for the most part, restricted to the classic liberal individual rights. Such rights fall far short of the social, political, economic, and cultural *collective rights* that are

unambiguously provided for in the Peace Accords, and which form the basis of such fundamental charters as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Hale (2002) argues that this minimal package, and the individual rights inherent in it, include

- identity as the product of individual choice rather than collective mobilization;
- anti-racism which takes the form of opposition to individual acts of discrimination rather than a struggle against structural inequality based on race;
- the valuing of Maya culture as the encouragement of individual self-esteem rather than the collective assertion of the Maya people and their right of self-determination; and
- self-help rather than collective empowerment (p. 521).

What is implicit in the offer of the “minimal package” is that popular leaders (Maya and non Maya alike) who agree to work within its logic will be given the opportunity to assume limited levels of authority, and have access to resources which they can use on behalf of their constituencies. This raises the issue of the risk of cooptation. Does participation within this framework constitute a capitulation to the state’s socio-economic and political agenda, or is it an opportunity to expand democratic space, including in the educational system, while waiting for the emergence of a more favorable balance of political forces that will strengthen the political capacity of the Maya movement to advance its political agenda.⁴

Upon reflection, the *seductiveness* of accepting the “minimum cultural package” is obvious. Given the setbacks they experienced since 1996 and, indeed, given the dangers associated with promoting any demands that provoke those sectors Jonas (2000) refers to as the peace resisters, who have demonstrated that they are prepared to resort to politically motivated violence, the offer of such space is tempting. This is especially so considering that the



“spaces of multiculturalism ... [are] in some cases ... substantial” (Hale, 2002, p. 521). The possibility of “substantial” opportunities to advance the objectives of a historically excluded people cannot be dismissed out of hand. It is not surprising that many leaders, both national and local, have chosen to work within the logic of this minimum cultural package.

By way of example, the decision by Demetrio Cojtí, a man of considerable ability and of unquestioned stature, to assume the position of deputy minister of education in the Portillo government in 2000, might have resulted in significant benefits flowing to the Maya communities long ignored by educational officials. There were, however, a number of risks associated with accepting such a position. These included what Carol Smith refers to as the “sharp disconnect between Maya intellectuals and the bulk of the indigenous movement in Guatemala” (Smith, cited by Petty, 2004, p. 3), a disconnect that would allow the Portillo government to ignore Cojtí without fear of political consequences, while benefiting from the legitimacy bestowed on the government because of his stature. The risk of accepting the position also included the fact that the resources available to the Ministry were extremely limited and, for the most part, were directed at maintaining the existing public school system that so ill-served the Maya population (Tay Coyoy, 1996; Sazo de Mendez, 1997; Cojtí, 2002).

Nonetheless, Cojtí was convinced to accept a key post in the state structure. Presumably, he thought that as deputy minister he could positively impact the delivery of such services to the underserved communities and advance such programs as the Bilingual Education program. However, this was not to be the case. By 2004, the end of the Portillo administration in which he had served, the UN mission in Guatemala observed that little, *including in the educational sector*, had been accomplished with respect to the implementation of the Peace Accords (MINUGUA, 2004).

The Education System and the Maya People

The basic statistics that reflect the educational reality of Guatemala as a whole, and particularly that of the Maya people, help us understand how issues relating to educational reform are central to the Maya movement and to the individual communities that form its base.

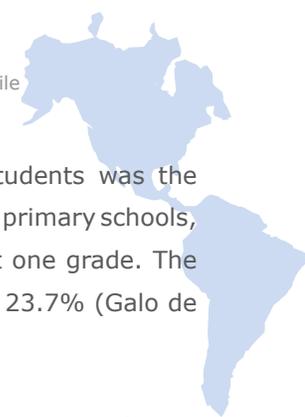
Based on data generated in the 1990s, the United Nations (1999) commented that in the Americas the Guatemalan publically funded educational system was second only to Haiti with respect to the failure to provide its population with basic literacy (p. 51). Five years later, the 2004 MINUGUA report suggested that little progress has been made since these statistics were generated, and this picture is not contradicted by even more recent figures from the Proyecto Regional de Indicadores Educativos (PRIE Américas, 2007).

Before reviewing the more recent data, statistics gathered over the past two decades already paint a bleak picture. In the mid 1980s, the number of Maya students in the education system was well below that of *ladino* students (i.e., students whose first language is Spanish), although it must be noted that the statistics for ladino students are not encouraging either.

Table 1: Shortfall in Access to Schools by Educational Levels, in Percentages by Ethnic Group, (1988)

Level	Percentage of Indigenous Enrolled	Deficit of Indigenous Enrolled	Percentage of Ladinos Enrolled	Percentage of Indigenous Enrolled
Preprimary	25	75	27	73
Primary	33	67	74	26
Secondary	7	93	27	73
Post Secondary	1	99	9	91

Source: Estadísticas educacionales 1988. SEGEPLAN y USIPE, cited by Tay Coyoy (1996), p. 44



For example, the preprimary, or kindergarten year, is guaranteed by the 1985 constitution; however, the level of nonparticipation in that program demonstrates the distance between constitutional guarantees and reality.

Another factor that contributed to the underrepresentation of Maya students in the primary grades is the drop-out rate from rural schools, as depicted in the following table:

Table 2: Percentage of Students by Grade in Urban and Rural Primary Schools, (1994)

Grade	Urban	Rural
Grade 1	30	70
Grade 2	36	64
Grade 3	43	57
Grade 4	49	51
Grade 5	55	45
Grade 6	59	41

Source: Galo de Lara (1997a), p. 17.

Sixty-five percent of Guatemala's population is rural (Galo de Lara, 1997b, p. 37). As this table demonstrates, in grade 1, 30% of the primary aged students are urban and 70% of primary aged children enrolled in school are rural. It would seem that rural students are overrepresented. Yet little comfort should be taken from this, as by grade 4 only 51% of the students still enrolled were rural, while 49% were urban. By grade 6, the last year of primary school, and the last year of schooling that is offered in most rural villages, only 41% of the students were rural children while the percentage of urban students had increased to 59%.

Meanwhile, the figures for grades 7 to 9 (*escuela básica*) were completely out of line with rural/urban population ratios. Eighty-nine percent of grade 7 – 9 students were urban and only 11% were rural. By grades 10 – 12 (*escuela diversificada*), 98% of the students were urban and 2% were rural (Galo de Lara, 1997b, p. 42).

Another problem facing rural students was the failure or grade repetition rate. In rural primary schools, 42.5% of the students failed at least one grade. The figure for urban primary schools was 23.7% (Galo de Lara, 1997a, p. 19).

Reviewing more recent figures (PRIE Américas, 2007), it is evident that overall school enrollment and educational achievement levels have improved during the 1999 to 2005 reporting period. The data, however, in no way contradict the essential picture depicted in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, the new data does not provide statistics for Maya students other than to note that the figures are worse for rural schools (where most of the Maya population lives) than for urban schools. Furthermore, despite these improvements, in most categories Guatemala remains firmly locked in the bottom 3 of all the countries in the Americas, and is in last place in the category of young adults who have completed a primary education. Nothing in this data gives us reason to believe that there has been an improvement in the situation of Maya students from that prevailing during the past 10 or 20 years. Furthermore, the PRIE report is silent on the central issue of the cultural relevance of the curriculum to the Maya population. It is, therefore, not surprising that educational reform featured so largely in the Peace Accords (United Nations, 1998), and that it continues to occupy a central place in the concerns of Maya activists.

Faced with these shortcomings, we now must turn our attention to how this educational deficit is being addressed at the local community level, especially through the role that the Maya organizations of civil society are playing.

PRODESSA and ESEDIR: Two Important Protagonists in the Maya Movement⁵

PRODESSA and ESEDIR are not Maya political organizations. They are Guatemalan NGOs that were created in the late 1980s to support Maya



community development and to strengthen a cadre of Maya leaders. Although they were established to fulfill two quite distinct mandates, over the years they have become difficult to distinguish from each other. ESEDIR and PRODESSA were founded in 1988 and 1989, respectively, by members of a Catholic religious community, the La Sallian Brothers. The La Sallians have a long history of working with Maya communities, and their practice has been deeply influenced by that engagement. In 1956 they founded the Instituto Indígena Santiago (IIS), a secondary school for Maya boys. The IIS offered as one of its options in its *escuela diversificada* (senior high school program) a primary teacher's certificate which qualified its graduates to return to their communities and teach primary school in their maternal Maya language. ESEDIR (La Escuela Superior de Educación Integral Rural) was founded specifically to offer a 10-month residential program leading to a *Diploma in Community Development from a Mayan Perspective*.⁶ The objective of this program was to develop the skills in community development and democratic practices of Maya leaders, most of whom were from isolated rural highland communities. PRODESSA (Proyecto de Desarrollo Santiago) was founded a year later as a rural community development agency. Over the years, PRODESSA has become a large and highly respected NGO that continues to work on its original community development mandate even as it works, at the national level, to implement the spirit of the officially neglected COPARE educational reform through its teacher education programs. Despite their decidedly non-Maya origins, both organizations have been transformed and have become an integral part of the Mayan component of Guatemalan civil society, with relations with both the popular and pan Mayan organizations.

During the 13 years (1988-2001) that it offered the 10-month residential leadership program, ESEDIR gained experience working with the teachers who made up many of the participants in the program.⁷ Following the decision to end that program, ESEDIR staff were able to transform its program delivery from

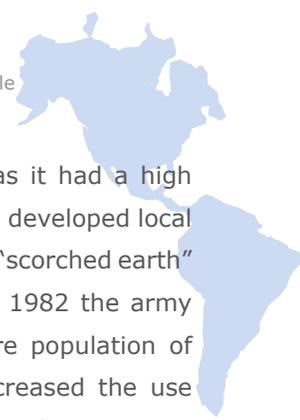
the residential model centering on Maya leadership training and developing democratic practices at the community level, to a distance education model centering on offering progressive and culturally sensitive part-time teacher training programs in several hard-to-serve regions of the country.

Educational Reform, Local Power, and the Rise of Maya Consciousness: The Experience of the Communities in Exile

The narrative that follows is an account of a complex grassroots experience that occurred under the most unfavorable of circumstances. Arguably, this experience could only have occurred in conditions similar to those described.

Yashar (2005) summarized the preconditions for the events which unfolded first in the refugee camps of Mexico and later in the relocated communities in Guatemala as follows:

- the creation of *enclaves*, by which she means a community where the state apparatus has insufficient *reach* to effectively impose its will. Yashar refers to such a situation as constituting *political associational space* which provides "the political opportunity to organize" (p. 8). As a result of this lack of reach by the state, both in Mexico and in Guatemala, these Maya communities were able to enter into a negotiated relationship with state officials in both countries on terms and conditions that were dictated by the communities. This made possible the *local power* (MacLeod, 1997) exercised by a growing number of Maya communities; and
- a negotiated collaboration with Maya and non-Maya organizations of civil society in the two countries that established a working relationship based, once again, on terms and conditions acceptable to the communities. This provided them with the resources and networks needed to survive and mature politically and



organizationally. In effect, during the years of exile *transcommunity networks* (Yashar, 2005) were established and strengthened. By transcommunity networks we understand the networking capacity which makes possible “the communication and cooperation that is essential for transcending geographic dispersion ...[and that provides] the forum for future indigenous leaders to meet, share common experiences, develop a common language, identify common problems, and articulate common goals” (p. 71).

While the experience described below may appear to be “historical” in that the origins of this case study date back to the 1980s, many Maya communities (frequently in collaboration with national or international support groups and/or funding agencies) are still working within this framework. The lessons learned provided a model for autonomous projects that are to be found throughout Guatemala today.

This particular narrative makes reference to two parallel developments. One occurred in the refugee camps in Mexico where Guatemalan Maya communities relocated in response to the genocide occurring in their homeland. It is a tale of taking matters into their own hands during this decade of exile to build communities that reflected their Maya culture, values, and aspirations (Sieder, 1998). The other development occurred in Guatemala and involves the previously described emergence of PRODESSA and ESEDIR as professionally and politically sophisticated players in the field of community development, educational reform, and teacher education, from both a socially progressive and a Maya perspective.

By the early 1980s the violence of the civil war in Guatemala had reached the point where the military was employing a “search and destroy” strategy. The villages of the Ixcán were particularly hard hit. The Ixcán is an extensive rural municipality in the department of the Quiché which borders on Mexico. It was identified by the insurgents as a potentially

politically fertile base of operations as it had a high level of community organization and a developed local community leadership. As a part of its “scorched earth” counter-insurgency strategy, early in 1982 the army burned villages, massacred the entire population of one settlement, and dramatically increased the use of assassinations and disappearances (CEH, 1999; Falla, 1992; ODHA, 1998). As a result, thousands of Maya Ixcán residents fled to Mexico, where they joined refugees who had survived similar treatment elsewhere in Guatemala (Nolan Hanlon, 1997). The refugees lived for over a decade in camps under the protection of the Government of Mexico, represented by its refugee agency, la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados (COMAR), and the United Nation’s High Commission for Refugees (AEN, 1999).

At first, life in the camps was very difficult, as aid was slow in coming. Over time, assistance from Mexican, UN, and nongovernmental and church sources began to make possible the organization of basic services, including education (AEN, 1999, p. 49).

Education in the Refugee Camps of Mexico: New Leaders are Forged in the Classrooms of the Communities in Exile

There were no teachers in the camps and so young people who had completed at least the 3rd grade were selected by the leaders of the camps to be trained as *promotores*. This term, *promotor*, was used to distinguish them from certified teachers. At first this educational process was supported by the Christian Committee of Solidarity of the Catholic Dioceses of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. The Christian Committee provided the camps with a few school supplies and materials to build primitive schools (at first, frequently just a roof on poles). They also paid the *promotores* a small stipend amounting to a few dollars a month. Within months of establishing the refugee settlements, the *promotores* offered their first classes (AEN, 1999, p. 43).



The *promotores* were, first and foremost, recognized community leaders, or they were young people with leadership potential who had a variety of personal traits, only one of which was a minimal level of educational attainment. One community leader commented:

The selection of the educational *promotores* was done on the basis of their experience and their capabilities. A group of possible candidates was proposed or elected: they had to have a record of community work and be honorable and disciplined. This is what counted in the selection of *promotores*. Some had their basic primary education while the majority had 6th grade (cited in AEN, 1999, p. 53).

The philosophy was that if you had a certain grade level and the confidence of the community, you could teach any grade below that. This meant that on occasion children as young as 13 were chosen to be *promotores*.

Ironically, despite the fact that *promotores* often had no more than a year or two education beyond their own students, and that they were working under other adverse conditions, the success rate in these make-shift schools was significantly better than in the rural schools in Guatemala. This was possible because in the refugee camps the parents of these students did not have personal parcels of land which required the labor of all family members; they encouraged their children to go to school as a way of keeping them busy. As a result, in the camps 80% of all primary school aged children were in school, and 50% of them completed grade 6. In contrast, in 1988 only 33% of the indigenous children were enrolled in primary schools in Guatemala (Tay Coyoy, 1996, p. 44) and, of course, not all of this low percentage completed their primary studies. In the Quiché, the department in which the rural municipality of the Ixcán is located, in 1995 the average student only attended school for 1.1 years (COPARE, 1998, p. 129). By these standards, what was accomplished in the camps was extraordinary.

Asserting the Autonomy of the Enclave Against the Distant State: Keeping the Mexican Secretariat of Education at Bay

Over time, the Mexican Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) attempted to assume responsibility for the education of refugee children and take such responsibility away from the camp leaders who were being advised by the Christian Committee of Solidarity. At first, the Mexican authorities demanded that in order that their studies be accredited by the SEP, the Guatemalan *promotores* teach the Mexican curriculum. The leaders of the refugee camps refused this requirement, arguing that they wanted the children to follow the Guatemalan curriculum into which they had infused Maya history and cultural values. After considerable controversy, a compromise was reached whereby the community leaders and the SEP officials accepted that the curriculum developed by the Guatemalans would be taught, but that it would be supplemented by a course on Mexican history and contemporary society.

The curriculum was not the only struggle the communities had with the Mexican authorities. Another related to who would supervise the schools.

The Mexicans wanted to appoint regional coordinators (or supervisors), while the Guatemalans wanted these posts to be filled by *promotores* elevated from the teaching ranks and chosen by the camp leaders. In the end, there were, in effect, two educational coordinators for each region, one a *promoter* and the other, a Mexican official, appointed by the SEP. The former handled the academic coordination for the area while the latter handled the administrative matters. (AEN, 1999, p. 49)

This arrangement had the advantage of allowing the Mexicans to save face while putting the academic



supervision firmly in the hands of the Maya camp leaders. The division of labor allowed for the delivery in the camp schools of what they called an *education founded on the reality of Guatemala* (AEN, 1999). The Maya community leaders defined 'the reality of Guatemala' through a Maya lens or, borrowing ESEDIR's terminology, *from a Maya perspective*.

In-service Training of the Promotores

Because of their lack of formal education and their lack of pedagogical training, it was essential that efforts be made to upgrade the promotores. Consequently, the promotores taught in the mornings and were taught in the afternoons by an emerging group of Maya activist/ educators. The content of their training programs included popular education techniques of the sort associated with Paulo Freire (1970); lessons on how to integrate environmental education into the curriculum; participatory techniques; drama; human rights and other, more conventional training such as typing, accounting, and religious studies (AEN, 1999, p. 57).

At first, because the promotores could only draw on their own experiences as students, the education that they provided was very traditional; however, over time, because of the content of their workshops, this would change, although the profundity of the change varied greatly from camp to camp (AEN, 1999, p. 56).

An important by-product of the creation of educational promotores was the formation of trained community leaders. All the promotores, even the youngest, as we have noted, were chosen for what amounts to their leadership qualities. These qualities, coupled with their in-service education and the responsibility they assumed both in the classroom and in the community, caused them to fully develop the values, skills, and knowledge associated with community leadership. It is, therefore, not surprising that the promotores were counted among those who represented their communities at regional meetings,

or who were key leaders on local development committees. These leadership attributes would be brought to Guatemala when the refugees returned from exile in the early to mid 1990s.

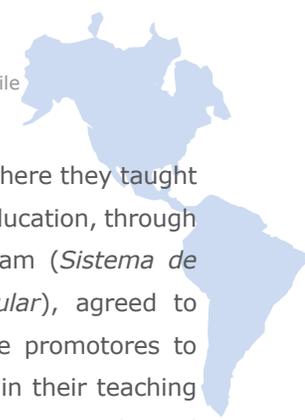
This is an example of Yashar's (2005) transcommunity networks, as the promotores had the opportunity to attend meetings in other communities with representatives from numerous settlements and from the various agencies that were supporting their work. They would bring back ideas from these encounters that reflected the political debates occurring in Guatemala, and thereby deepened their understanding of local empowerment and autonomy.

By the early 1990s, international pressure on both Guatemala's government and its military high command, coupled with the Central American peace process, set the stage for the refugees to leave Mexico and to return home. The signing of two agreements between the Government of Guatemala and the United Nation's Human Rights commission in 1991 and 1992 formalized this situation (Jonas, 2000).

Education in the Resettled Communities

Once they were settled in their new communities in Guatemala, one of the first things the former refugees undertook was to reestablish the schools. The promotores from Mexico who wished to continue teaching did so and, where necessary, new promotores were appointed. One of the first things that the community leaders wanted was for the Guatemalan educational authorities to recognize, and give credit for, the studies that the children had undertaken in Mexico. They also wanted the promotores, and the courses that they took in Mexico, to be recognized by the Ministry of Education. Of course, as might be anticipated given their battles with the Mexican SEP, the communities wanted such recognition on their own terms.

The relations between the returnees and the Ministry varied from place to place, and according to the



personality of the local supervisory officers; however, in due course, the relations between the new arrivals and the Ministry were worked out. This included an agreement whereby the government recognized the studies that the students had completed in Mexico and the Mexican experience of the promotores, who were considered to be unqualified teachers in need of continued in-service education in order to achieve their primary school teaching certificates (AEN, 1999, p. 77).

The Ministry provided very little to the communities in the way of human or material resources. In 1993, in the Ixcán alone, the newly established schools needed 200 teachers. The community leaders demanded that all teachers sent to their schools be capable of offering fluently bilingual education but, given the scarcity of bilingual teachers, the Ministry could not begin to meet the needs of these schools. Under no circumstances would the communities have tolerated unilingual ladino teachers. But the communities needed teachers, so, as they did in Mexico, they named promotores to fill the gap. The communities had access to international funds administered, for the most part, by local nongovernmental agencies. It was within this context that PRODESSA and ESEDIR began its educational collaboration with the Maya communities in the Ixcán. These two organizations, known for their work in Maya communities during even the darkest days of the repression, were asked by local community leaders, in 1993, shortly after the refugees first returned, to work on the professional development of the newly appointed promotores in the community of Victoria 20 de Enero. This experience, in turn, opened the door for a much expanded PRODESSA/ESEDIR role in the Ixcán region.

The Mexican-trained promotores who wanted to continue to teach had to be (and, indeed, wanted to be) certified as primary school teachers. This meant completing senior high school with a specialization in primary education. Such a program could only be offered through a series of distance education programs on weekends, when the promotores could

occasionally travel from the villages where they taught to a central location. The Ministry of Education, through its SIMAC teacher preparation program (*Sistema de Mejoramiento de Adecuación Curricular*), agreed to provide training that would allow the promotores to complete senior high school and obtain their teaching certificates. However, the SIMAC program was plagued with problems, and soon the executing agency walked away from it (AEN, 1999).

As this drama unfolded, Redd Barna, a Norwegian nongovernmental agency, was supporting a process of institutional strengthening with the *Asociación de Educadores del Noroeste* (North-west Educators' Association, AEN), a professional and advocacy group which represented the promotores of the Ixcán and neighboring areas. With the demise of the SIMAC program, Redd Barna expressed an interest in financing an alternative Maya teacher preparation program if AEN could find a suitable executing agency. AEN approached PRODESSA and ESEDIR and invited them to offer the program.

PRODESSA's Work to Implement Education from a Maya Perspective in the Ixcán⁸

Brother Oscar Azmitia, PRODESSA's Executive Director, accepted the AEN invitation to deliver the SIMAC program; however, given PRODESSA's student-centered and transformative pedagogies, and its promotion of Maya values in education, Azmitia proposed that the program be significantly modified. The PRODESSA team understood that a program designed to upgrade the academic and professional level of the promotores had the potential of strengthening an emerging social movement "which would contribute to the creation of communities that were more participatory and democratic" (AEN, 1999, p. 94). This belief was based on an analysis of the experience of the Mexican camps where the promotores had become invaluable community leaders. It also reflected the success that ESEDIR was having with its residential leadership program, *Community Development from a*



Maya Perspective.

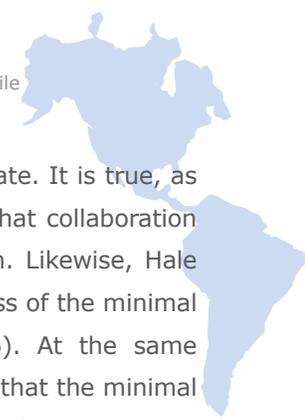
The goal for PRODESSA was to deliver an educational experience that was as much oriented to developing the already significant leadership capacity of the promotores/teachers as it was to enhance their skills as classroom teachers. In addition to the core requirements dictated by the Ministry for the SIMAC program, PRODESSA had suggested courses be developed on (i) environmental education, (ii) health education, (iii) human rights, and (iv) Maya culture. The details of this proposal had been discussed at a meeting with local Ministry officials and with the promotores who would be taking the program. At that meeting, the methodology to be used and the curricular content was discussed, and this input was reflected in the proposal submitted to, and accepted by, the Ministry.

PRODESSA hired a specialized team of Maya curriculum writers who developed teaching materials that met with the approval of the *Comités Educativo de Autogestión Educativa* (COEDUCAS), the locally elected school boards, which had assumed responsibility for the supervision of the newly established schools in the resettled Maya communities.

In July, 1994 PRODESSA launched a 5-month part-time program designed to fast-track the promotores who did not have a grade 6 education to that level by year's end. This combined a weekend residential component with a distance component. The following year, 1995, PRODESSA organized a 12-month program to speed the promotores through the 3 years of junior high school in 1 year. Thirty-nine promotores completed this second stage. In 1996, PRODESSA offered the senior high school program, collapsing a 3-year program of full-time study into 2 years of part-time study. This constituted the teacher training component and, once successfully completed, led to the promotores' certification as primary school teachers. Thirty-five promotores graduated as teachers in each of the 1997 and 1999 classes.

Today, a decade after the particular events just described unfolded, both PRODESSA and ESEDIR continue to provide socially transformative professional development for Maya teachers in the Ixcán and elsewhere in indigenous villages throughout Guatemala. Their approach, as has been the case for years, is to prepare teachers to teach from a values perspective that can be said to be drawn from both wings of the Maya movement. Their "option for the poor," drawn from ESEDIR's *Proyecto Educativo* (ESEDIR, n.d.) and any number of PRODESSA planning documents (e.g., PRODESSA, n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c; and n.d.d; PRODESSA, 1998a; 1998b), reflects the class-based politics of the Maya popular left, while their commitment to "education from a Maya perspective" reflects the pan Maya culturalist orientation. All this occurs in a space that these two NGOs have negotiated with the Guatemalan state, and that they have created for themselves as a result of almost two decades of marshalling their limited human and financial resources with a great deal of political acumen.

In effect, the graduates of the programs offered by PRODESSA and ESEDIR are implementing in their classrooms the main recommendations of the 1998 COPARE Commission on Educational Reform. This ability to implement educational reforms still not approved by the Ministry of Education a decade after their publication constitutes an example of the creative use of space arising from both the "weak reach" of the Guatemalan state and the cautious acceptance of Hale's "minimum cultural package" to create the social base upon which a democratic Maya movement can be built when the conditions permit. The irony is that it is not primarily the *políticos* of the Maya movement that are building this base, but rather it is the contribution of experienced NGOs and grassroots leaders in the communities where these NGOs work that are preparing the way for future developments, the exact character of which cannot yet be perceived.



Conclusions

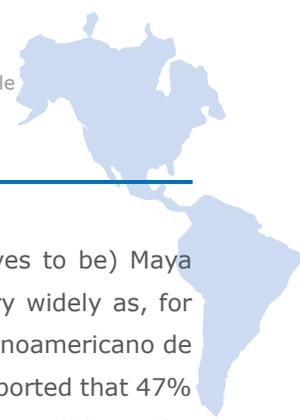
What I referred to early in this paper as ‘the might have beens’ weigh heavily upon the aspirations of Guatemala’s Maya population. What if a split had not occurred in 1991 within the nascent Maya movement? What if the constitutional amendments that would have institutionalized the main provisions of the Peace Accords had been approved in 1999? What if the main proposals of the COPARE educational reform had been implemented, and basic literacy taught in a culturally relevant manner was being delivered to every child in Guatemala? What if the socioeconomic provisions of the Peace Accord had begun to be implemented? What if?

Most of the “what ifs” are not the result of happenstance. With the exception of the 1991 split in the Maya movement, any of the “what ifs” that we can imagine for Guatemala occurred, or failed to occur, because political forces that had a vested interest in a particular outcome organized to achieve that outcome, while other forces failed to achieve the results they wanted. Despite the fact that the 1996 Peace Accords ended the armed conflict on terms that reflected the aspirations of the Maya people, the fact of the matter is that the Maya political organizations have not been able to effectively pressure the government of Guatemala to implement the provisions of the Accords. Unlike Ecuador and Bolivia, where the indigenous movements have matured politically and organizationally and have successfully ensured that their interests are taken seriously (Selverston-Sher, 2001; Postero, 2007), their Guatemalan counterparts are still recovering from the devastation of a counter-insurgency strategy and a dismantling, during the 1970s and early 1980s, of their civil society the likes of which has not been witnessed anywhere else in the Americas.

In the meantime, uncoordinated but important work is occurring at the grassroots level within the spaces offered by the state, or created by the

communities in the absence of the state. It is true, as critics like Veltmeyer (1997) argue, that collaboration with the state can lead to cooptation. Likewise, Hale correctly emphasizes the seductiveness of the minimal cultural package (Hale, 2002, 2006). At the same time, Hale is also correct to point out that the minimal cultural package offers some substantial opportunities. I suggest, without wanting to overstate the case, that PRODESSA and ESEDIR represent organizations that have made substantial contributions to the development of a future Maya movement while advancing a model of democratic education from a Maya perspective. They have done this by not only taking advantage of the space negotiated with the state (e.g., implementing the discredited SIMAC program in an entirely new guise; preparing rural Maya teachers for certification) but by taking advantage of space they have created through their own initiative (e.g., ESEDIR’s Diploma in Community Development from a Maya Perspective). In the latter case, in the aftermath of the assassination and/or disappearance of Maya community leaders by the death squads, ESEDIR offered a program, in the form of a postsecondary diploma, which prepared a new generation to assume leadership in their communities and to do so from a socially progressive and culturally relevant perspective. At the same time, PRODESSA was founded to provide sustainable community development assistance in the same communities from which the ESEDIR students were drawn, so they would not go back to their communities well trained but empty-handed.

The net result of this work, and that of scores of other organizations, is to prepare for when more promising spaces open and, in those changed circumstances, apply these skills, developed at the local level, to build a coherent national movement. This movement should then be capable of insisting on the implementation of the spirit of the provisions of the Peace Accords, including those relating to educational reform from a Maya perspective. Ultimately, such educational reform is a prerequisite for democratic citizenship in a multicultural society like Guatemala.



Notes

- 1 Reports of the exact percentage of just how many Guatemalans are (or consider themselves to be) Maya varies considerably. Indeed, reports as to exactly what the population of the country is vary widely as, for example, occurred in 1994 when the census figures reported 8.3 million while the Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía (CELADE) reported that the population that year was 10.3 million. That census reported that 47% of the population was Maya. Dr. Jorge Solares, a sociologist with FLACSO, uses the figure 50%, and this is the figure I have adopted (O’Sullivan, 2001). In a recent article, Demetrio Cojtí (2002) claims that 60% of the population is Maya.
- 2 The following account is a summary of the study of these events done by Sosa Velásquez (1998, pp 83 – 95), who based his work on interviews with eye-witness and documentary accounts of the events of December, 1990.
- 3 Stavenhagen (2002) lists the following countries, in the order that their constitutions were amended, as having included protections for aboriginal peoples: Guatemala, 1985; Nicaragua, 1986; Brazil, 1988; Colombia, 1991; Mexico, 1992; Paraguay, 1992; Peru, 1993; Bolivia, 1994; Ecuador, 1998; Panama, 1997; Venezuela, 1999.
- 4 Space limitations prevent me from describing the events that contributed to a weakening of the Maya movement in Guatemala. These include the split that occurred between the so-called *popular left* component of the movement and the *culturalist* Pan Maya component (described by Hale, 1994 and Warren, 1998), and contrasted with the comparative strength of the indigenous movements in Bolivia (Postero, 2007) and Ecuador (Selverston-Sher, 2001).
- 5 The overview of PRODESSA and ESEDIR found in this section is taken from my doctoral dissertation (O’Sullivan, 2001).
- 6 In this article I write of “education from a Mayan perspective”. ESEDIR coined this terminology. It refers to a pedagogy that infuses Maya history, philosophy, spirituality and, in effect, what is referred to as the Maya *cosmovision* into everything they teach, including their teacher training programs. It involves respecting what they understand to be the essence of Mayanism in everything they do – in short, infusing the knowledge, values, and behaviors that reflect Maya ways of thinking, acting and being. Clearly, there is no precise definition of what it means to teach from a Maya perspective because, as the very concept of pan Mayanism is contested, by extension, so too is the notion of a Maya perspective. ESEDIR and PRODESSA, however, have articulated such a perspective and integrated it into all of their pedagogical work.
- 7 The inclusion of a large number of teachers in the leadership program was not the result of a conscious decision. Because ESEDIR is an Escuela Superior (a postsecondary institution) it is required by the Ministry of Education to accept only those students who have a secondary school diploma. In the Maya communities, frequently the only people that have a secondary school diploma are the teachers in the local elementary school. Fortunately, these teachers are often active community leaders, and so the ESEDIR program for community development from a Maya perspective fit nicely with the needs of local teachers.



- 8 While ESEDIR was working in the Ixcán during the time period covered by this case study and continues to do so to this day, the reference will switch to the work of PRODESSA, as it was PRODESSA that was initially approached by Redd Barna and which took the lead in the events about to be recounted.

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