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# Education in Communities of Population in Resistance in the Ixcán: State denial and educational mediation.

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## Abstract

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Following the State violence in the early 1980s, many displaced communities were established in the Ixcán jungle. Once organized, and while being pursued by the army, the communities started to plan their own educational process on the basis of their shared needs and political horizons. With the advent of peace in 1996 and new educational reform, the State established relationships with the communities in the area of education, disrupting the process they had begun. A close-up look reveals how teachers and students are establishing mediations with the contents and relationships the State seeks to establish with them. This allows these teachers and students to serve as a type of filter that restores some measure of autonomy from the State's involvement, and it also seeks to reconsider the basic needs of pertinent, democratic education from a marginalized position.

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*Lo que sí es cierto, es que nadie sintió el golpe.  
Pegó con dardo muy fino. No duele y no se  
siente  
pero con tenacidad pudre el hueso.  
Corroe, gangrenosos, traspasa las paredes  
más espesas  
y gotea dentro del alma fosilizando  
los sueños, la vida.*

**Roberto Obregón (1965)**

## Introduction

The objective of this article is to demonstrate the role of educators in the Primavera del Ixcán community as mediators between their students and the relations established by the State, after the signing of the Peace Accords and based on the State's education policy. Following decades of war and nearly centuries of political marginalization, the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 presented an opportunity for the parties in conflict to seek dialogue and broad consensus on points within a shared national horizon. This necessarily

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involved taking into account the groups engaged in historic conflict and the various demands made repeatedly over decades against the military dictatorships, plus a broad-based democratization in the way power was organized and major decisions were reached in the country.

The role of education in this aspect was vital. In 1950, only 28% of Guatemala's total population was literate; three years later this percentage had risen to 37%, and by 1973 it had extended to 45% of the country's population (Guerra-Borgees, 1986: 300). Illiteracy has been overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas, and in those years the majority of the population lived in rural areas. In 2010, according to the National Literacy Committee, 19.48% of the population above 15 years of age did not know how to read or write, and this was especially the case among rural women. This 2010 statistic represented progress over previous years, but still reason for grave concern. And the educational reform attempted beginning in 2004 was not even close to meeting the expectations and primary needs of the country in this area.

In addition to the quantitative element mentioned, the criticisms made of the current models have emphasized the limited pedagogies taught at centers of education (FNL, 2006; Morales, 2007), which ended up preparing individuals on the basis of educational contents that did not provide them with the necessary tools to modify, from their positions, the unfair reality presented to them—with 35% of the population living in poverty (Barreda, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

With respect to this last aspect, the role of education in various indigenous communities displaced by the State repression unleashed particularly in the early 1980s (Carmack, 1991) sparked notions aimed at democratization and direct involvement by individuals in the political and social processes surrounding them. It is important to state that this is central to any process seeking genuine democratization and not only formal subjection to certain rights that—due to the very social circumstances in which they are applied—become inoperational. And it was in this aspect—among others of equal importance—in which educational reform ended up becoming more of a complication than a prudent reorganization for addressing the complex problems undermining individual and collective development in the country.

Taking this situation into account, it became vital for us to investigate three aspects of this process. The first aspect is the historic process that led to the construction of pedagogies in the displaced communities and the nature of such pedagogies. The purpose here is to understand, as a second aspect, the manner in which the impulse toward democratization was managed, from the perspective of the struggles undertaken in the communities, and in particular, popular education, in its attempt to contribute to a broader process of change. And with this as the result, the third aspect is to understand the way in which teachers managed to mediate—on the basis of learned pedagogies and techniques—the contents that the State attempted to establish.



Map 1. Ixcán, in the northern part of the department of Quiché.

Source: Falla (1992: viii).





With regard to the first and last aspects, it was necessary to conduct field work in the communities where these pedagogies were particularly significant. And this is where the possibility arose for visiting the community of Primavera del Ixcán, which currently brings together the former Communities of Population in Resistance in the Ixcán (CPR-Ixcán). This community is located in the Ixcán municipality, in the northern part of the department of Quiché, which is located in the northwestern part of Guatemala (Map 1). Over ten ethnic groups, each with their respective language, are represented in this community, and all of them share a past in which they fought for land and against repression during the second half of the last century.

Based on this understanding, the decision was made to carry out field work for a period of four months while living in the community. This was determined to be a sufficient period of time for reconstructing the educational and organizational history of the community, and the mediations currently carried out by the teachers. Taking into account the aspects that were important to investigate, in line with the study's objectives, the next step was to plan the methodology, which is explained briefly below.<sup>2</sup>

In order to reconstruct the community's organizational process during the years of displacement, it was important to consult a series of extensive interviews with a number of the community's principal historic leaders, conducted by an unknown researcher in 2004. These interviews were transcribed and filed in the community's main office. The community's leaders at the time of my research allowed me unlimited access to these interviews. When a different source is not specified, the historic reconstruction of this aspect is based on these interviews.

With regard to education during the years of displacement, much of the general information was obtained from the text of the Advisory Assembly of Uprooted Populations (*Asamblea Consultiva de las Poblaciones Desarraigadas*—ACPD, 1996), and some of the gaps found in the narratives were complemented with some semi-structured interviews conducted on one or more occasions with eight of the teachers who were responsible for education during those years and who continue to work as educators. Once again, when a different source of information is not cited, the reconstruction is based on these interviews.

This series of interviews was also helpful in understanding and reconstructing the current educational process. In addition to the eight teachers cited, five young teachers who had joined the community's education team in recent years were also interviewed using the same format. Thus, 13 of the 15 teachers were interviewed one or more times with the aim of understanding aspects regarding their current conception of education, their internal organization, their pedagogy and techniques, problems encountered and other aspects which, as will be seen, were taken into consideration for the purpose of understanding the current educational process.

This research also involved participating in classroom sessions in each of the grades in the elementary school and secondary education institute. The idea was to participate in at least two full days in each grade, in an attempt to cover all the subjects taught. In the classrooms, teachers were asked for permission to participate exclusively through observation and note-taking. In some cases, after the classes were over, there were brief conversations with teachers and students in order to clarify some aspects that were not clear from observation alone.



Lastly, at the end of the field research, a focal group was conducted together with the entire team of teachers, for the purpose of facilitating an exchange between the systematization developed and the teachers' perspectives regarding the future of education in the community.

To avoid getting lost in the immensity of the data, it was necessary to have a theory that would make it possible to understand teachers as critical links in the national education process, and not as simple passive objects whose only function was the reproduction of society, as it was abstractly thought some decades back (Althusser, 2003). Unlike that posture, Gramsci (2001: 147-150) states that instruction can only be represented by the living work of teachers, who are familiar with both worlds—the official and the communal—of contents and students. In addition, Gutiérrez (2004: 38) states that the mediation carried out by teachers—what he referred to as *pedagogical mediation*—makes it possible to address the contents and forms of expression of the different subject areas, with the aim of making the educational act possible within the horizon of education conceived of as participation, creativity, expressiveness and relationships. In the educational practices of the teachers, taking into consideration their legacy of struggle against the State, there is a fight and competition between the State's concept of the world and other conceptions, both explicit and implicit (Gramsci, 2001: 53). The culture experienced in classrooms and outside classrooms thus becomes a site of struggle (Apple, 1980, 1997).

Lastly, this research will be completed with a historical investigation of the literature, in order to position data from a local level in the broader historic process in which it is encompassed and conditioned. This bibliographic material allowed me to make

certain general interpretations of Guatemala's historical process.

## 1. Autonomy and education

It is complicated to understand the experience of resistance and autonomy of the CPR-Ixcán communities without giving a brief overview of their history. The historic marginalization to which the country's indigenous Mayan populations have been subjected is certainly not unknown to anyone. Nor is it anything new to hear how the labor force of this population was placed at the service of the primary agro-export crops for decades, with coffee and then sugar at the top of the list. At the same time, indigenous people, organized since colonial times as communities, have found it necessary to seek various forms of resistance that have in turn made it necessary to adapt, sometimes in a conservative manner, to the situations in which they have found themselves. The communities' servitude in relation to the coffee plantations, in addition to the strict control established by local authorities, imposed from the highest level of the political hierarchy, kept these communities with their hands tied for decades. The way in which they organized themselves was an internal response of conservative adaptation and the search for relative autonomy from the relationship established by the oligarchical coffee project (Wolf, 1955, 1957).

After the revolutionary interlude (1944-1954) and the frustration provoked when agrarian reform was aborted through the US intervention (Gleijeses, 2008; Handy, 1992; Tishcler, 2001; Taracena, 2002), the military dictatorships installed from 1963 on were faced with the need to find forms of land distribution that would not attack the ownership of large plantations. Following the proposal from the



Maryknoll religious order, *campesinos* from different ethnic groups, primarily from the northwestern department of Huehuetenango,<sup>3</sup> began to colonize the Ixcán area. Given that the area was remote, at a time when guerrilla organizations were preparing for a second cycle of their fight against the State, and were looking to the indigenous populations as potential allies (Payeras, 1989; Sáenz de Tejada, 2007), and with an emerging but strong cooperativist movement in Ixcán, the stage was set for military repression to move farther into the region. During the period of the most tension in the Guatemalan crisis, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the regime dealt its final blow in an attempt to survive the uprising. Its response was the massacre of entire communities, while at the same time democratic institutions were being formally reconstituted.<sup>4</sup>

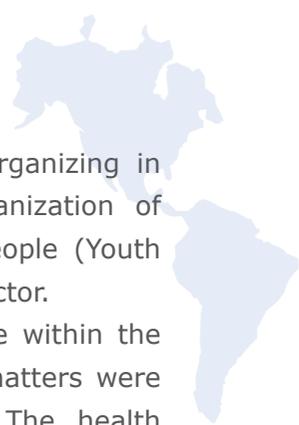
What should be emphasized regarding that period of Guatemala's historical process is the manner in which the State responded to the demands for democratization and changes in the productive matrix. Instead of absorbing the demands, it intensified the polarization even more, and thus rejected the demands of indigenous communities and other labor union, *campesino* and political organizations, with all the potential ramifications. The most critical aspect of this response was massive repression, but it continued with persecution following the displacement. And in this way the repression and denial inevitably revived the possibility of the communities' autonomous formulation of their own demands, at the local, marginalized level, on the one hand, and the possibility of confrontation with the State, on the other.

And thus, the CPR-Ixcán communities were born—as part of the revolutionary project of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (*Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres*—EGP). They were

conceived of in a similar way as in Vietnam, with these bases of support for revolutionary organizations serving as an economic, military and political bastion. However, above all, their origin was based on the population's struggle and its demands—which at that time were basically two: the struggle for land, and the daily fight for survival. After the massacres, the communities began to gradually organize themselves with the former as their long-term goal, and the latter as their daily struggle. Groups of families that came together in the mountains increasingly found other groups and began to see the possibility of getting organized.

What was most important was to obtain land for planting corn, although in the beginning families still had the remains from previous harvests, which they shared among their members. When those remains were gone, they attempted to plant more corn, through individual efforts, but this became increasingly difficult, since the army was constantly patrolling nearby areas and when it found crops, it destroyed them. The justification for the attacks by the army was based on the claim that members of the CPR communities were not civilians, but rather combatants with the EGP (Falla, 1992: 207).

After months of living in the mountains without any organization and under continuous attack by the army, groups of families began to come together and confront the situation in a way that allowed them greater control over their lives, in the context of the war. And thus, in 1983 the *Comité de Parcelarios del Ixcán* was formed, to be later renamed the *Comité de Emergencia de Parcelarios del Ixcán* (CEPI), placed in charge of leading, guiding, organizing and carrying out everything in relation to the everyday life of the CPR communities (Duro, 2004: 54). The CEPI authorities and members of the local committees were elected directly



and democratically every two to seven years. Members were always recognized community figures who provided an example through their work, patience, and organizing ability.

One of the basic necessities that the CEPI had to resolve urgently was food production, which became one of its two *basic structures*, as they were commonly referred to. Since individual attempts at production were unsuccessful during the early months of resistance, the population decided it would be better to work collectively. And in order to avoid problems with respect to the food produced, the CEPI and the local communities were responsible for distributing food to each family, depending on the number of family members and the amount of food they possessed. The CEPI, in conjunction with the Koljós, a *hinged* structure of the EGP, analyzed where it would be best to plant, the amount of food that had to be produced, depending on the season and circumstances, and how much labor had to be mobilized, etc.

Since government repression was constant, security was the next aspect to be addressed. This matter of security went from merely looking out, to a complex system of vigilance, in which turns were taken and three basic positions were covered. One of these positions encompassed large areas, on the *front line* for *scouting*. Then, there were the *mobile units*, which worked on the periphery of each one of the communities and which were in constant movement. And lastly, there were the *fixed units or posts*, which were located near the communities.

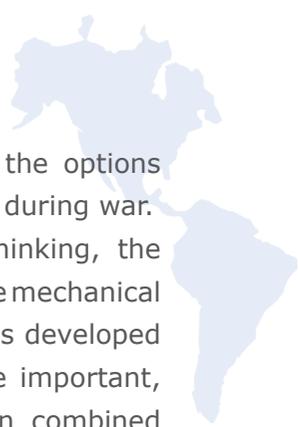
In addition to this collective form of organizing within the Communities of Population in Resistance of the Ixcán, there were sectors of the population that decided to organize and make demands in relation to their particular struggles and rights, always within the overall struggle, which was the framework

of the resistance. The sectors organizing in this way included women (Organization of Women in Resistance), young people (Youth Organization) and the religious sector.

As all aspects of social life within the CPR-Ixcán communities, health matters were organized in a collective way. The health *promoters* could focus on their work as health specialists, and dedicate all their time to this work, since food for themselves and their families was assured by the CEPI's regulation and redistribution of food production.

With regard specifically to the topic of this paper—but certainly not unconnected to what has been described thus far—we find the area of education within the CPR-Ixcán communities. Despite army attacks, there was an urgent need for children to learn basic reading skills.<sup>5</sup> In the early days, the CEPI, together with the EGP's educational front-line structure, organized education in the communities, providing *cursillos*<sup>6</sup> (courses) and a few *cartillas* (credentials) for education promoters. Following the government offensive of 1987-88, education in the CPRs was reformulated in the five communities at that time (there would later be a total of 25). The Popular Education Team (*Equipo de Educación Popular*—EEP) was established, and placed under the responsibility of a recognized community leader who had just escaped from a kidnapping by State forces.<sup>7</sup> The intention was to leave education work within the communities well structured, so the communities would later be able to take over the process.

From the beginning, education in the CPR-Ixcán communities was thought of in a different way. Because of the context of war and repression, together with their position of resistance, education played an important role in raising children. Education helped the population<sup>8</sup> more profoundly understand the repression and marginalization they were



experiencing. The intention was to remove from one's consciousness ways of thinking that did not permit individual and social subjectivity to break with traditional ways of viewing the world—ways that demonstrated and continue to demonstrate the world as natural, and not historical and social.

Education, in turn, was dialogue-based. According to the pedagogical conception of dialogue, it is the primary generator of knowledge, and on the basis of dialogue, two different worlds can understand each other, and with a critical attitude, seek ways to build their reality. Thus, the intention was that children would not merely learn from education promoters in a unilateral or implicitly authoritarian manner, as in traditional education. To the contrary, the idea was for dialogue to play a fundamental role in education, and for the violent, hierarchical element to remain outside education (ACPD, 1996).

Early on, one of the methodologies used was Paulo Freire's methodology involving the use of "generating words." A fundamental characteristic of this methodology is the search for socially and culturally relevant words or topics, on the basis of which overall social reality can be better understood, while at the same time, early reading skills can be developed. For example, in the lesson on "corn," students learned the word for "corn" in each of the languages spoken by the children in attendance, and they researched types of corn, who grew it, how and why it was grown, and whether or not it was fair to do so (ACPD, 1996: 178). Another interesting case was that of teaching the five vowels. In this case the teaching revolved around the generating word "refugiado" (refugee in Spanish). This word not only contains each of the five vowels, but also expressed broader meanings of the reality experienced by the children, and expressed

the situation of war, and one of the options available to the civilian population during war.

As an aspect of critical thinking, the objective was to avoid falling into the mechanical repetition of formulas and methods developed in other contexts. The latter were important, but only as tools that were then combined with the ideas proposed in the communities. The idea was to generate in this way a type of pedagogy in movement that progressed at the rhythm of the needs and experiences of the CPR-Ixcán communities (Freinet, 2002: 9).

Another important element of this comprehensive education in the communities in resistance was linked to the two structures in the organization: production and security. In the case of the first, the need to maintain intellectual work connected to physical work was established from the beginning, and thus students participated in agricultural production on an ongoing basis. Secondly, there was also a relationship between security and education from the beginning. In addition to focusing on the need for young children to learn, the classes also facilitated keeping children together and not spread out.

The idea was also to assure that children experienced the process of democracy and organization, and that these concepts would become more than merely words existing outside their experience. Instead, their experience would develop on the basis of these processes, in practice, while developing respect for and promoting democracy, obligations, commitments and benefits. Thus, the organization of children in the classroom was facilitated, allowing them the opportunities to resolve simple problems on their own. This concept of democracy differed from the procedural democracy that was gradually imposed with the military reforms of the mid-1980s, in which the right to participate was restricted to casting votes in elections every



four years. Here, to the contrary, children were taught to participate actively and critically in their society.

From that point on, the way they were organized and educated would reflect the political project and the communitarian and democratic values behind their demands prior to the massacres. Their political aspirations were restricted to the local level, due to the non-existent space for broader participation in the 1980s. And from that position, and through their practices, they exercised their discursive critique of the way in which society and the State that defended it were organized.

There was no pre-designed plan for creating the CPR communities, and if there would have been, it would have been significantly modified by the initiatives emerging from the community members who saw an opportunity for expressing and meeting the needs they had experienced historically as well as those arising over time. The organization of the communities was built with the experience acquired in this process, and amidst strong internal debate among the population with regard to their present and their future.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Transition and mediation

The Ixcán Communities of Population in Resistance had managed to survive efforts to eliminate them—lasting over a decade—and despite the restrictions on their autonomy as a result of the repression, they had established their own ways of relating to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, this autonomy was characterized by the particular circumstances at the time, and was very much associated with the critical situation that the communities did not wish to prolong: the war.

At the beginning of the 1990s, they began to generate discussions on the need to no longer remain clandestine. And in December of 1990, at their Ninth General Ordinary Session, the communities made a Public Declaration,<sup>10</sup> together with the Communities of Population in Resistance of the Sierra (located farther south in the department of Quiché). However, even though they managed to leave their clandestine beginnings behind, the political conflict was not yet over.

Beyond describing the process of political movements and tensions involved in the peace process,<sup>11</sup> we would like to simply emphasize the nature of the negotiations, and the way in which the situation was handled by the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*—URNG)—which since 1982 had joined together three guerrilla organizations and a faction of the Communist Party. Because of the strategy used by the URNG, the social movements and communities that had supported it began to distance themselves from the guerrilla organization, and to a significant degree, this led to the poor results from the peace accords in the years after peace was achieved. On the basis of the work by researchers who have addressed this matter in great depth (Jonas, 2000; Torres-Rivas, 1998; Rosada-Granados, 1999), we can affirm that these limitations and the mediocre way in which the accords were implemented can be explained by the guerrillas' military and political defeat in the 1980s. When the time for peace arrived, the guerrillas lacked the necessary political and social strength to assure compliance with the accords. And the inadequate strategy used by the guerrilla's leadership was not very helpful. From the perspective of the political, military and business elites, this was clear. And it became apparent as the years passed. These elites would permit a certain consensus



in the formal aspect of the accords, while they were gambling that the real political strength of each of the actors involved would weigh in. Educational reform was impacted by this unequal correlation of forces.

And what was now the Primavera del Ixcán community witnessed these results in the national sphere up close. With the population socially marginalized in a remote village in the Ixcán, receiving only minimal basic services provided by the State, and facing a huge debt looming ahead to acquire their land, the results of the much-touted peace were becoming apparent. The population was faced with a new situation of survival. After re-organizing into a single community (Duro, 2007; Sosa, 2001; Suárez de Galgami, 2007; Véliz, 2008), what the CPRs had constructed would be tested in a new way. In relation to the educational process, it would now be directly linked to the State through the Ministry of Education, which had its own way of organizing education in the country, and its particular way of understanding education.

It is necessary to point out that this process should not be understood simply as an equal relationship between two sides, but rather as one with expressions of conflicts and antagonisms. Otherwise, one would fall into idealizing what peace has signified and failing to understand it as another political context in a long-standing conflict between the State and the population that has not yet been resolved. This is important to emphasize in the case of the Primavera del Ixcán, since the State's conceptions of the world are in direct conflict with what is referred to as the "culture of resistance" (Duro, 2004).

This conflict between the different positions is manifested specifically—and also in many other cases—in the social relationships established within classrooms. These are relationships that develop between generations

of residents of the CPR-Ixcán communities—teachers and students—and between them and the post-war State, expressed concretely in books, courses, methodologies, didactic methods, school materials, salaries and other manners of interaction.

Regarding teachers, and especially teachers who received their training during the resistance, their conception of the education process is significantly different—although it would actually be quite complicated to carry out the process in this way, given the limitations characterizing the relationship with the State structure. The current role of education in Primavera del Ixcán, according to the teachers, is linked to the development of three fundamental areas. The first is the development of society in general, since by learning about what is happening in the community and in the country through the educational process, it is then easier to learn, to participate and to act.

The second area of development is the community. From the teachers' viewpoint, education does not begin in school, but rather in the womb, since the time of birth, when the first stage of development occurs. Then, schools complement what has been learned thus far. Schools should be an additional support, providing guidance. Education takes place in the entire community, and thus brings dividends for the entire community. Without education, the community will not be able to advance. Education is thus intimately linked with the community: education *from* and *for* the community.

Lastly, education promotes the development of each of the individuals participating in the process. This means that education seeks to prepare individuals not only in academic terms, but also in a particular ethical-moral behavior in relation to society. The way this is carried out can be observed



in a Natural Sciences class in a second-grade classroom. The topic for the class was health and nutrition. A discussion was initiated on economic and social issues related to health. It was pointed out that there are no hospitals in the Ixcán, and the nearest hospital is over six hours away. In addition, efforts were made to analyze the agricultural use of land in the Ixcán. Emphasis was placed on production in family vegetable gardens, aimed at achieving a balanced diet and improving health, and the importance of land was also underscored. After the discussion, the students were organized into groups so that each of them could explain the way they conceptualize what they see lacking in their communities and affecting the health and nutrition of inhabitants.

To complete the lesson, the teacher dictated a passage from the textbook on what nutrition means and why health is important. In this way, the contents on health and nutrition were linked directly, through a participative dialogue, to the problems related to land and the need for land in order to obtain food for a basic, complete diet. The educational contents were also linked to the need for health centers that work together with community members in a comprehensive way to care for their health. In this way, the topic covered was connected at the community and national levels. The contents did not remain at the abstract level, and were instead contextualized and linked to a particular national problem—insufficient land. The topic was also covered in a constructive manner, with emphasis placed on vegetable growing in family plots.

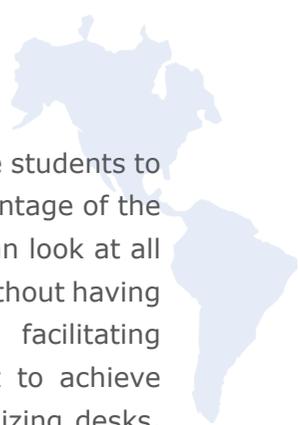
Another aspect of this critical position is that agricultural production is included as a key element in educational processes in Primavera. The entire production process is guided by the teachers, and carried out by the children, on land obtained by the school from the community cooperative. Part of what

was produced—at least in the 2007 school year—was consumed by the students, and the other part was sold to community members. The income generated was administered by the students and used to purchase various food products. This combination of intellectual and manual work reflects a strong criticism of traditional education, which categorically separates these two forms of obtaining knowledge, and denigrates manual work while favoring intellectual work.

Still another vital point in the Primavera education process consists of the enormous efforts by teachers to make contents pertinent, even though this is not the case in the official texts. This interest on the part of teachers is expressed in a strong desire to revive the languages used by the different linguistic groups living together in Primavera (Sosa, 2001: 119). The official texts include these languages—in a formal, but less-than-serious manner—and not in response to a profound need to claim the right to be educated in one's own language, as emphasized by the teachers. A sense of belonging must not only refer to being *culturally acceptable*, as presented in official discourse.

For teachers in Primavera, it is vitally important to adapt examples to the social and economic reality in the community. In a Social Sciences class in a first grade classroom, the topic of the economy—or more specifically, raw materials and natural resources—was addressed. This topic, from the traditional economic viewpoint in the textbook, was explained by arguing that natural resources and raw materials are limited, and must therefore be handled in the most efficient manner possible.

To the contrary, the discussion generated in the Primavera classroom progressed to the topic of the trees cut down in Ixcán forests and the problems around mining and dams in the



area. It was said that national and transnational companies merely seek profit, without even the most minimal concern for biodiversity or communal problems, and they attempt to provide solutions that only gloss over the reality, by providing waged work and poorly adapted development projects. In this way, the focus on the economy went from a traditional focus based strongly on the neoclassical school of thought, to one in which the importance of the relationship between humans and nature was taken into consideration. This relationship was developed strongly during the years of resistance. Emphasis was also placed on seeking comprehensive social development, in which, it was explained, the needs of the community are considered first—not the profits for a company that knows nothing about the area.

Another important point in the education processes in the Primavera del Ixcán is the importance placed on recreational activities, particularly through what are referred to as *dynamics* or recreational games in the classroom. With this type of activity, it is possible to leave the expected routine in the educational process—confined to the classroom—and place this process in contact with the rest of reality.

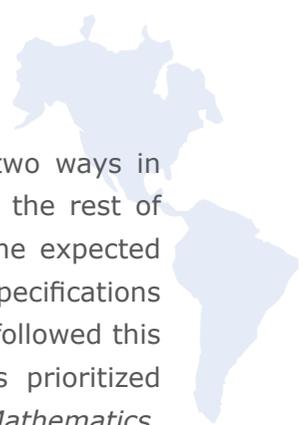
To continue addressing the critical tradition learned during the war, education is conceived of as dialogue, and not an imposition of knowledge as in “banking education,” a term used by Freire. And in order to encourage dialogue among students, and between students and teachers, it is necessary to use a particular way of physically organizing the classroom. The half-moon and circular patterns of desks are the favorites used by the Primavera teachers. In their opinion, results are better when these patterns are used. The objectives of using these patterns are to control the classroom and encourage dialogue. The half-

moon pattern is used to encourage students to pay closer attention, and the advantage of the circular pattern is that students can look at all the other students face-to-face, without having their backs to anyone, thereby facilitating open discussions. This is difficult to achieve in the traditional pattern of organizing desks, with rows and columns of students facing the front of the classroom, where the teacher is standing.

As institutions, the elementary school and the basics institute (the first three years of secondary school in the Guatemalan system)—which are the two learning centers in the community—carry out institutional mediations between the statutes specified by MINEDUC and the community. None of these mediations are rejected by the State, indicating a certain margin of action.

One of the changes made in the schools addresses the subjects taught in the first grade, with emphasis on language and mathematics more than on the other six subjects taught. During the first six months of the school year, only two subjects—mathematics and language—are taught, to allow children to adapt to school, since many of them did not attend kindergarten. Another change is that the sections within each grade are organized by linguistic group. There are sections of only children who speak K’anjob’al (the predominant linguistic group), and there are other sections with all the rest of the students. The objective of this strategy is to allow students to also learn in their own native language.

In the case of the Basics Institute, the changes made were more oriented toward adapting what is required by the State to the needs of students and teachers. The subjects taught are the same as those required by the State, but the way in which students are evaluated is different. Basically, more importance is placed on student participation,



instead of only emphasizing tests and individual work. Fifty percent of each student's grade is dependent on tests (with four a year), 10% is based on individual participation, another 10% on individual work, and the final 30% is based on a *parallel text* turned in by each student. These are texts that each student must develop for each subject area twice a year, at mid-term and at the year's end. The students must write their own texts based on what they learned up to that point in time, from their own perspective, while providing examples and their own analysis on the contents learned. These parallel texts allow students to move from a role of simply passively receiving knowledge to actively receiving knowledge and becoming involved in dialoguing on class contents (Gutiérrez, 2004: 110; Azmitia, 1996: 3).

The school calendar has also been modified. Instead of a weekly calendar with no classes on weekends, there are three weeks of classes, including Saturdays, and then one week for reviewing what has been covered, one week for evaluation and one week of rest.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, in addition to the institutional mediations and pedagogical conceptions, there are the mediations carried out by teachers, on their own behalf or as a group. The teachers no longer have their own organization that directly influences education planning, as in the case of the Popular Education Team during the war. Now, teachers devise their own ways of organizing subjects and contents in line with what they feel is best. The changes in this regard are not supervised by the state supervisor or the school directors or the institute, and consequently, teachers can make the changes they feel are necessary, as long as they keep in mind that tests must assess the minimum contents required by the State.

The first mediation that teachers may carry out is the selection of the subjects they wish to teach. Unlike in the first grade,

as already described, there are two ways in which subjects may be taught in the rest of the grades. One is to teach all the expected subjects, following the State's specifications to the letter. One of the teachers followed this option. The rest of the teachers prioritized four basic traditional subjects—*Mathematics, Language, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences*—thus breaking with MINEDUC's fusion of subjects in the social and natural area (*Social and Natural Environment*). Two other subjects—*Artistic Expression* and *Physical Education*—were given a limited space in the weekly schedule. And the two new subjects from education reform—*Citizen Formation* and *Productivity and Development*—are not taught at all, since the guidelines sent by the State are incomplete, and the teachers have no way of knowing what should be taught in these subjects.

After the subjects have been selected, the next step is to decide how much time to give to each subject. This can only take place in elementary school, since in secondary school the director of each institution makes the decisions regarding the schedule, based on the proposals received from all the teachers.<sup>13</sup> The CTA, which is MINEDUC's direct representative in Ixcán, requires that elementary school teachers dedicate 45 minutes every day to each of eight official subjects. Nevertheless, the teachers dedicate different amounts of time to the subjects, with the previous changes made in the selection of courses. When the teachers established their schedules, they presented three different positions.

A third mediation on the part of the teachers occurs when they decide which contents presented in the textbooks provided by the State are relevant for teaching in their classes. This selection process reveals the teachers' priorities in regard to education within the community. It is difficult for the teachers



to carry out this selection of topics in all the classes. And in mathematics and language, it is complicated to contribute new topics.

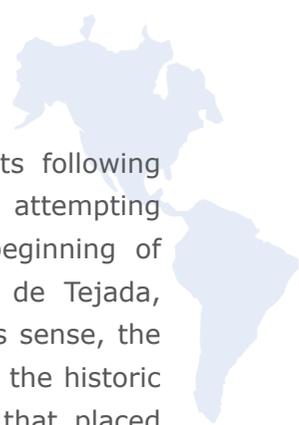
This is easier to carry out in the case of topics related to social and natural sciences. According to the interviews conducted with teachers, one of the State's constant omissions in these areas is the topic of war and the need to remember one's history. These teachers take the responsibility to look at these issues, emphasize them and spend the necessary time on them. From the perspective in the State's textbooks, war appears to be just one more event, and something that occurred in the past, with little relevance in the present. The reasons that the war began are never addressed, little is said about the massacres, and little or nothing is said about the history of the communities in resistance and the refugees. Since these topics are not addressed in the official textbooks, the teachers fill in this gap, with emphasis on remembering the reasons for the war; helping the children and youth to see the origin and development of their Primavera community; why they are where they are; why there is so much diversity; why there are so many orphaned children; how the war began; whether anything was resolved; what the Peace Accords actually were, etc.

During a third grade Social Sciences class, a teacher used an activity aimed at looking at the students' war experiences, with the objective of studying the differences in these experiences in an area as small as the Ixcán. In this process, they reaffirmed the memory of what happened to their families, while always looking at the reasons, and bringing these struggles to the present day. They remembered the problems that are once again emerging in the area, in terms of violence and cooptation of community leaders, and the new immersion on the part of the State and multinational corporations, with intentions

clearly lucrative in nature. The activity in this particular class consisted of each student going in front of the group to share their particular family experiences of the war, after having investigated what happened with family members. Then, the students entered into a dialogue on the reasons for the war and the diversity of experiences. From the teachers' viewpoint, these activities help to avoid forgetting the recent past of the community and other neighboring communities.

Another problem experienced by teachers in relation to the contents of official textbooks consists of the examples and topics used out of context. For this reason, the teachers frequently present only part of the information, while enriching the topics with examples that provide a context that students are familiar with and can thus better understand. A positive aspect in this regard is that when little information is provided, the teachers and students are motivated to investigate the topics in the sources available to them. Teachers are constantly engaged in this search for materials. From their perspective, the official textbooks sent by MINEDUC are insufficient and only a part of their teaching. They find it necessary to look for other resources, texts and materials to complement the contents provided. For example, they use the texts from their professional preparation—developed by PRODESSA and ESEDIR,<sup>14</sup> which are educational institutions with a critical perspective and of integral Mayan formation—and also the texts they used during the war.

Lastly, the teachers strongly criticized the official textbooks. They argue that the State includes too much information, signifying that it is summarized and only minimally explained. Thus, the topics are broad, and the examples provided are outside the rural Mayan-indigenous context, plus they are highly technical with a strong emphasis on abstract



concepts. In addition to this general way of explaining topics, subjects are not integrated and neither are the topics covered. At least at the secondary level, the contents covered in each grade are separated into eleven subject areas, and no connection is established between them. As for the topics covered, an example mentioned by the teachers is the minimal attention given to poverty. Each time poverty is mentioned, it is addressed in a merely informative manner, never delving into the social reasons for this condition of society. The issue is isolated and even individualized. Something similar occurs with the use of Mayan symbols—such as the numbers, significant persons or historic examples. They are not presented in an integral manner as part of a vision of the world, but are rather used to adorn the text. This topic is an example of what the teachers refer to as a failure to present the texts in a neutral manner.

Nevertheless, the teachers declare that they know who the State is, and who is behind the textbooks—which, according to our consultations, is a concealed manner of stating that there are interests on the part of political and business sectors that the teachers are able to identify and that are translated into the contents disseminated by the State.

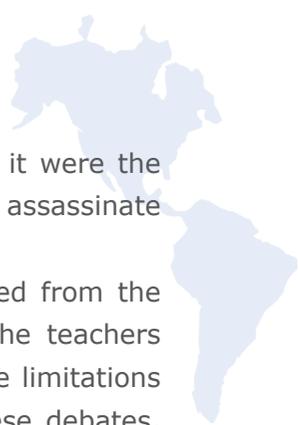
### **3. State, mediation and the limits of democratization**

According to what we can interpret from this investigation, the case of the CPR-Ixcán communities illustrates a process of education for democracy, although not necessarily for democratizing the State and its proposals for public policy. And the reason it does not seek to democratize the State is not because of a lack of interest. To the contrary, the current Guatemalan State, as a form of organizing power and major decisions, has a particular

scheme designed by its architects following the defeat of progressive forces attempting to democratize society at the beginning of the 1980s (Jonas, 2000; Sáenz de Tejada, 2007; Torres-Rivas, 1998). In this sense, the form given to the State highlights the historic horizontal break-down of power that placed a categorical end to the possibility of openly discussing the country's primary problems.

Education policy is framed within this process. And it appears this position does not correspond to the governments that occupy the Ministry of Education's institutional apparatus every four years. Rather, it appears this is a State policy that fails to take into account educational needs from the viewpoint of the massive marginalized groups of the population. From what we have been able to conclude, this assertion is confirmed by the social struggles currently underway in the country and the response from the State (FNL, 2006; Morales, 2007; Véliz, 2009).

We are not only looking at indigenous communities here, as can be currently observed with the reforms aimed at dismantling teacher-training schools and the teaching profession, requiring a two-year preparatory education, followed by three years of university studies. Despite the major mobilizations currently underway,<sup>15</sup> demanding that these reforms be reconsidered—since the families of those studying to be teachers will not have the means to support them during their educational cycle, given the urgent need to obtain a wage, due to the poverty suffered (something that could be resolved through a three-year teaching degree)—the response has been repression and nearly a total lack of dialogue. The willingness to change on the part of the Ministry of Education—shared explicitly with student leaders—is affected by not having sought consensus with the groups that will be affected. And this is its main shortcoming.<sup>16</sup>



In order for the Guatemala State to acquire characteristics that benefit the groups historically marginalized, these groups must participate in the State's reconstruction. As evident in history, this is the only way that a form of organization will genuinely and fully reflect these denied interests, and the only way these groups will be allowed to enjoy their own broader guarantees and rights.

Months after the Peace Signing, there were many internal debates in response to the possibility of establishing a relationship with the Ministry of Education. Some teachers expressed their desire to actively enter into the process of constructing a new State, as proposed in the peace discourse; others were more cynical and felt it was necessary to take a great deal of care with this relationship, since

the State and the sectors behind it were the same forces that had attempted to assassinate them during the war.

Today, as may be concluded from the focal group organized, most of the teachers accept that they did not see these limitations with sufficient clarity. Beyond these debates, however, all of them agree that what remains for them, as has been the case thus far, is a long road ahead toward achieving the political objective outlined by their grandparents when they settled in the Ixcán: to finally build a society in which everyone is truly included. And in this sense, the type of education they are promoting will play an extremely important role in preparing individuals who view community, solidarity, direct democracy, the need for land and respect for nature as inalienable principles.

## Endnotes

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1. For information regarding deficiencies affecting the country in terms of social justice, the most impartial text that can be found is the report written annually by the United Nations Development Program. See its National Human Development Report for 2012.
2. The complete work can be found in Véliz (2008).
3. Regarding the colonization process, see: Manz (1992), Suárez (undated) and Garst (1993).
4. These topics have been widely studied, although none of them have been addressed organically. Regarding the massacres, the reader may consult the compilation by Carmack (1992) and the report by the Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión del Esclarecimiento Histórico—CEH*). Regarding the massacres in the Ixcán, the study by Falla (1992) is vitally important. Regarding the State military policy in general, the reader may consult the works of Figueroa Ibarra (1991), Rosada-Granados (1999) and Villagrán Kramer (2004).
5. Regarding the education processes in the CPR-Ixcán communities, see ACPD (1996), Suárez (undated) and Véliz (2008).
6. The training courses received by teachers during the days of the CPRs were referred to in this way.
7. This leader was Emeterio Toj Medrano. His case is documented in the report entitled *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio* prepared by the Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión del Esclarecimiento Histórico—CEH*). See Annex I: Volume 1, Illustrative Case No. 98.

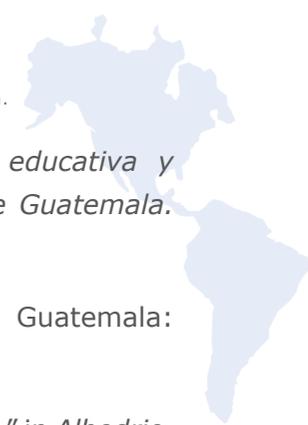


8. We refer to the population and not only students, or students and teachers, who are the traditional subjects of education processes, because the conception of education in the CPR-Ixcán communities was, as will be seen, comprehensive and focused on the entire community, with strong emphasis on reflecting upon everyday experience.
9. In this regard, one of the members of the EEP stated: «*Education wasn't perfect, nor was it just trash. It was our capacity.*»
10. *Declaración Pública de las CPR del Ixcán*, made public through the major communication media in Guatemala on January 31, 1991, specifically Guatemala Flash and Prensa Libre. Also, released at the international level. The purpose of the document was to make the communities' existence known, and to demand respect for their rights as a civilian population, and also demand an end to the army's relentless pursuit and attempts to eliminate them.
11. The topic is brilliantly analyzed by Jonas (2000) and Torres-Rivas (1998), and meticulously detailed by Aguilera (1998). Regarding the interests at play behind the negotiations, as told by one of the negotiators, the reader may consult Rosada-Granados (1998). And the best analysis of the policy maintained by the elites from the time of the massacres to the peace negotiations may be found in Figueroa Ibarra (1991).
12. This system was decided upon in order for students living outside the community to be able to remain in the community for the four weeks of class, and then return to their own communities for a week of rest. To the contrary, they would have to return to their own communities every weekend, leading to additional expenses for their families.
13. The inspector, who is the direct representative of the Ministry of Education in the Ixcán, requires elementary teachers to dedicate 45 minutes each day to each of the official eight subjects. The teachers, however, with the previous changes made in the selection of subjects, dedicate different amounts of time to these subjects.
14. *Proyecto de Desarrollo Santiago* (PRODESSA) is a Guatemalan NGO that has been promoting popular education since April 1989, together with the *Escuela Superior de Educación Integral Rural* (ESEDIR), which is part of the country's public university, Guatemala's University of San Carlos.
15. See Cerigua and La Hora, 05/07/2012.
16. Regarding the final pitched battle between government forces and those in teacher training, see La Hora, 04/07/2012.

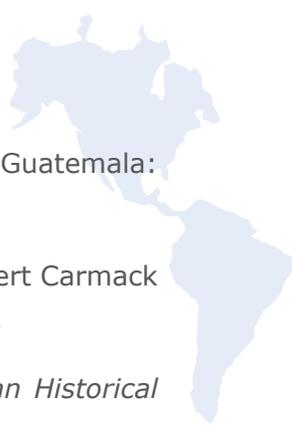
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