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Gathering life stories and identifying perspectives: school institutions in a Nahua community in Mexico

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Abstract

This article presents the processes through which inhabitants of an indigenous Nahua community have valued and linked their school institutions with their life projects and with the community's development. To this end, testimonies from 14 inhabitants who were born between 1933 and 1985 are presented. Their narratives reveal the conflicts, expressions of resistance, and assessments of school institutions characterizing the various generations of inhabitants, thus contributing elements for an intercultural analysis.

Introduction

The contents of this article are part of a research project for a doctoral program in which one of the objectives was to use an intercultural perspective to analyze and reflect upon the development, influence and role of school institutions in the everyday lives of persons living in an indigenous community. To this end, the testimonies of 14 inhabitants are presented here, addressing the importance that schools have had in their lives and the lives of members of their families through their school trajectories. Of those in the original group, eight were women and two were men, and they were born between 1933 and 1985.

There is also an account of the processes of establishing junior high and senior high school education in the community, and in this context the narratives of four more persons were added.

The study was conducted in Hueyapan, a Nahua community near the Popocatepetl volcano. The community is located in the Tetela del Volcán municipality, which is in the northeastern part of the Mexican state of Morelos and borders with the states of Mexico and Puebla. In this community, as in many other places, local inhabitants have managed to conserve practices, beliefs, knowledge, customs and traditions with indigenous roots because of their ability to take ownership, resist and innovate in their cultural exchanges with

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population groups living nearby geographically, and also with various government agencies and institutions. They have linked their everyday and community life with processes of social, economic and political transformation in the region where they live.

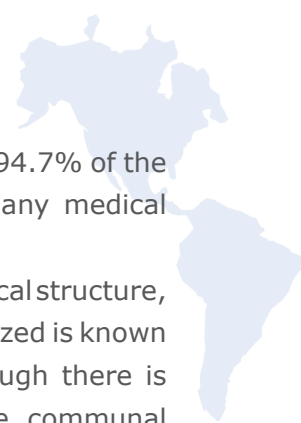
The conceptual elements providing a framework for this research are from an intercultural perspective. This means it was necessary to assess and connect the different perspectives in a positive, creative manner. Consequently, the interpretation developed through this approach was based on studying the social interaction among groups that are culturally diverse in terms of resistance, appropriation and innovation processes, through which their knowledge and practices are expressed and valued. The basis for the premise of this analysis is that even when these relationships are presented in a dominant-dominated framework, this does not imply complete subjection (see Bonfil, 1993 and Giménez, 2001). Thus, in current indigenous cultures it is possible to distinguish ideas, beliefs and configurations of the world that have been constructed, negotiated, discriminated against or imposed in relation to other cultures and social groups. However, despite influences and transformations, there are continuities that can be identified (see Warman, 2003 and Arizpe, 2004). It is thus understood that culture is manifested, is learned and makes itself known through interaction with others, and it is constructed in line with certain needs, interests and experiences that have an impact on subjects in their personal trajectories.

The analysis conducted of the life stories is focused on the interpersonal relations between those giving their testimonies and their families and school institutions, and also on group relations and the community's perspective with respect to the establishment of schools, specifically in the hope that they

will contribute to social development and improvement. It is also observed that school trajectories indicate how exchanges are sometimes positive and sometimes negative, depending on individual experiences, attitudes and mindsets. These exchanges reflect the trust placed in institutions as agencies of transformation that provide inhabitants with tools and knowledge that may be capitalized upon. The narratives reflect two readings of cultural syncretism: viewed as alienation by older generations and viewed as enrichment by younger generations (see Albó, undated, p. 7). Still, both perspectives are anchored in a type of logic that dictates that *schools represent options*. From an intercultural approach, we might add that *the mediation for converting them into spaces that contribute to strengthening communities depends on those attending them*.

1. Hueyapan, the context of the research and the first traces of school education in the community

The contextual and historical elements characterizing Hueyapan are important to the degree that the approach used here makes it necessary to understand culture as a dynamic context, composed of structures of signification, produced and reproduced in relation to and within the processes of transformation arising in different spaces and promoted from different contexts and spheres. This gives meaning to personal life projects and to the community project (see Geertz, 1994). Consequently, following is a description of some geographic and sociodemographic conditions characterizing the community, and also a brief summary of the beginning of school education in the community, covering the period from 1870 to 1940. The time frame



extends only to that year, since the narratives of the 14 inhabitants interviewed begin in the 1940s.

Hueyapan is divided by five ravines that serve as natural boundaries within the community, which is also divided into neighborhoods and districts. For decades, the rugged conditions prevented easy access to the community. The land where the community is located is suitable for planting seasonal crops such as corn and beans, and growing fruit like peaches, avocado and figs. A significant portion of the land is forest land, and also high mountain country, with elevations at 2,340 meters above sea level and higher. The climate is predominantly cold and humid, which are characteristics that prevented sugar haciendas from expanding their domain to include the community.

The population's labor activities are fruit-growing, crop-growing, livestock ranching and beekeeping, followed by tourism, commerce, services, and to a lesser degree, industry (INEGI, 2005). In the fruit-growing area, producers have organized into cooperatives, in order to better compete in the market. In the industrial area, one of the traditional, representative occupations for women is to make wool garments by weaving on simple or backstrap looms; these women are known as *gabaneras*.

According to official statistics, the population of Hueyapan was 6,014 in 2005, and it was identified as a highly marginalized locality. Of the inhabitants 15 years of age and older, 10.4% were illiterate, 39.6% had not completed elementary school, and 5.5 was the average number of years of schooling completed. In terms of basic services, 18.6% did not have running water, 6.6% did not have a toilet or sewage system in their homes, and 3.3% did not have access to electricity (Conapo, 2005). In 2000 one of the areas

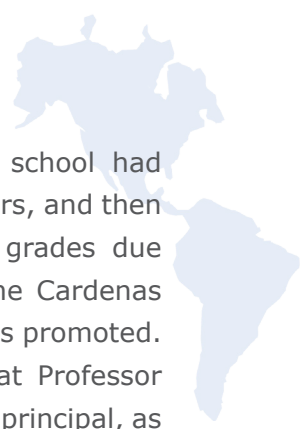
least addressed was health, since 94.7% of the inhabitants were not eligible for any medical services.

Regarding the existing political structure, the local authority officially recognized is known as the *ayudante municipal*, although there is also an *ejidal* commissioner, the communal property commissioner, and the local Water Board. According to local residents, the latter has a great deal of power in making political decisions, since it controls a key resource for the economy, overseeing the high basin of the Amatzinac River. Nevertheless, all the matters considered to be important are voted on during general assemblies attended by the community.

The first efforts in Hueyapan in the area of education, as far as the available evidence indicates, date back to 1870, and were promoted by a local resident who learned to read and write with the help of the local parish priest (Zamarrón, 2000). Due to the region's geographic conditions, the scarce presence of authorities, and only the beginnings of influence from nearby haciendas, it is understood that interest in education originated among the residents themselves, in addition to the religious groups established in the community which focused on teaching basic knowledge in reading, writing and arithmetic.

This reflects the situation experienced in education around the entire country. Basic arithmetic and Spanish would be the only knowledge transmitted to inhabitants until around 1900. It was during the *Porfiriato* that efforts began to create schools, from elementary school to institutions of higher education, and regulated by norms that were the basis for a homogenous educational system (Padilla, 2007).

The main legacy from the *Porfiriato* would be the promotion of the Law on Basic Instruction, even though the resolutions



developed at the First *Indianist* Congress, held in 1910, were not included. Nevertheless, this Law would be overshadowed by actions taken by Alberto Pani, Deputy Secretary of Instruction in the Madero government. Through a survey on popular education, he managed to question the rights of all Mexicans to an education and also the type of education that should be imparted to indigenous persons. Despite the studies conducted by the *Indianists*, the prevailing criterion was that *indigenous cultures not only lacked any value but were harmful, and should thus be destroyed in the interest of national progress and unity* (Loyo, 2006, p. 364).

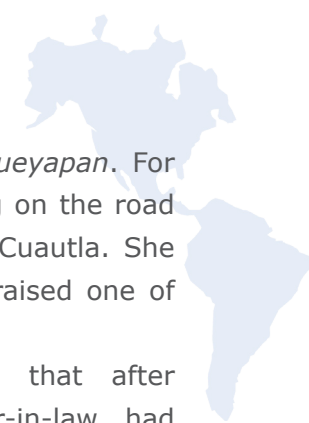
In accordance with these ideas, beginning in the first decade of the 1900s, teachers from other communities began to arrive in Hueyapan. This took place in the context in which Justo Sierra, as Secretary of Public Instruction, supported the idea that in order for the country to become integrated, it would be necessary to change the mentality of indigenous people through schooling (Loyo, 2006, p. 361). By 1919 the inhabitants of Hueyapan decided to take the organization of school institutions into their own hands, with Eligio Pérez in charge of teaching, receiving a payment of fifty cents a day (Friedlander, 1977, p. 186). Ironically, the community was responsible for not only education but also the application of the integrationist policies dictated by the Department of Public Instruction.

According to Friedlander (1977), Hueyapan's elementary school was completely organized by the 1930s. However, a number of those who attended the school at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1960s reported that the schools in their neighborhoods offered only up to the fourth grade of elementary school and that those who wished to continue their studies were obliged to go to the municipal seat or Cuautla, the nearest city. In the best of cases, they said that schools were multi-

grade. It is thus likely that the school had been in full operation for some years, and then had to discontinue some of the grades due to conflicts taking place during the Cardenas years, when socialist education was promoted. It is mentioned, for example, that Professor Eligio, who had become the school principal, as well as other teachers, made students march through the community and shout "Long live socialism!" at every corner. This and other rumors regarding socialist teachings were not well accepted by parents, and led to the closing of the school, which did not re-open until two years later (Friedlander, 1977, p. 187).

There are some reports dating back to 1932 and prepared by students at the Oaxtepec Teacher Training (*Normal*) School who visited Hueyapan in an expedition for training purposes. In these reports the students mention poverty, alcoholism and the use of an indigenous language as being associated with the people's backwardness and ignorance. They indicated that these were some of the problems that had to be confronted and transformed in rural schools (Martínez Moctezuma, 2006, p. 281). These assessments by the students studying to be teachers revealed their prejudices with respect to being indigenous and were in line with the framework for political, cultural and social discourse dictated by the school curriculum in an era characterized by deeply-rooted assimilationist notions.

The political climate started to calm down at the end of the Cardenist years. In the 1940s the first teachers from outside the community arrived. They spoke only Spanish and did not allow students to use their native language. There were also "cultural missions" that inhabitants actually carried out. Beginning during this era, there were traces of education based on an integrationist ideal, made possible by teachers who watched over the political precepts around being indigenous, both in and



out of classrooms, thereby relegating native cultural expressions to personal, everyday spaces.

The education offered during the period from 1940 to 1958 can be characterized as aimed at consolidating the national unity project that began during the time when Cárdenas was president. Noteworthy during this period was the country's industrialization and a progressive increase in the urban population. The impulse in education was directed at the urban sector of the population, diverting attention away from marginalized urban, indigenous and rural education (Olivera, 2007). Partly as a result of Hueyapan's geographical isolation and the type of work its inhabitants engaged in—mostly as *campesinos*—they were left out of the national project. It is in this context in which the school trajectories of the inhabitants interviewed are interwoven, and the account given here, from this point on, is based on what they recall.

2. Basic tools and elementary education

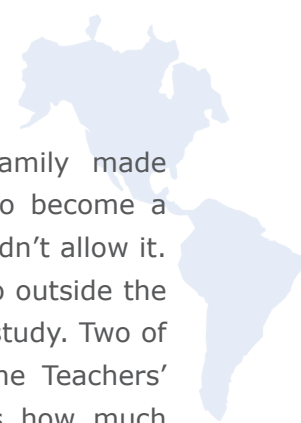
The individual and collective processes of taking ownership in the national educational project and the transformations of those processes over time are presented in this section, through the reconstruction of the life stories of Hueyapan residents. When there is a change in the place from which schooling is formulated, perspectives also change and different understandings are reached in terms of the impacts on the everyday life of educational institutions.

Doña Candelaria was born in Hueyapan in 1933, and like many in her generation, she didn't go to school. She works as a street vendor or *pochteca*, and since she never went to school, she says she knows *absolutely nothing*. Once she learned a little from a woman in her neighborhood: *to read barely enough to know that this bus is going to Cuautla and that one*

to Yecapixtla and that one to Hueyapan. For over 30 years, she's been selling on the road to the Agua Hedionda resort in Cuautla. She had ten children, and she also raised one of her grandchildren.

Doña Candelaria recalls that after she got married, her mother-in-law had great affection for her, because there had been only males in her family, and *Doña Candelaria* helped her in the kitchen: she roasted (*tetamaba*), made tortillas, prepared the meals and helped her mother-in-law all day long. In contrast her husband *didn't understand things*, he worked in the fields, and didn't help her send their children to school. That's why *Doña Candelaria* learned to sell things, in order to at least provide them with an elementary school education. She earned money selling *chirimoyas*, pomegranates, avocados, *chayotes* and rolls. She used the money she earned to buy notebooks and ballpoint pens. She's proud of the fact that she managed to send her grandson to junior high school, and she acknowledges that it took a lot of work, since it was at that time that work was begun to build a wall around the school, and families were asked to contribute. Since she didn't have any money, she talked to her grandson about not attending school anymore, but he told her: *Oh mama, the girls are going to say: 'you started so you could quit?' It's going to be embarrassing for me to quit before I finish*. That's how he was able to convince her, and she managed one way or another, and together they were able to keep him in junior high school until he finished. However, he then went to Mexico City to work with two of his uncles as a bricklayer's assistant.

Doña Candelaria's life as a *pochteca* is closely linked with her possibilities and her desire to send her children and grandchildren to school, and with confronting the economic difficulties experienced in a rural family—



beyond the household responsibilities she had acquired and her roles as a wife and daughter-in-law. Her lack of school preparation was not an obstacle for her, with the exception of learning basic mathematics. She learned to sell things, to travel outside of her community and to find, through this activity, the potential for autonomy. These actions illustrate how important schooling was to her, since her work activity outside the home was not for the purpose of complementing family income to cover household expenses, but rather as an investment in her children's education.

Doña Elvira was born in 1944. She actively promotes the Nahuatl language and Hueyapan's traditions. She participated in the so-called "cultural missions" as a helper, but she didn't manage to complete any professional studies because her parents didn't have money to send her to school, plus they didn't allow their daughters (they had only two) to go anywhere outside Hueyapan. She tells how she helped a lot at her neighborhood school when she was an adolescent, and that the school teacher was her boyfriend. This was a difficult situation because, as she recalls, she had another boyfriend who was from Tetela, and he came looking for her at the end of the school day. She would take advantage of the time when the teacher was taking the flag down from the flagpole to see her other boyfriend at the corner where he would be waiting for her. This worked until one day some students discovered her at the corner and ran to tell the teacher that she was there talking with another young man. She tells how even though her boyfriend from Tetela was very handsome, she decided to drop him since her boyfriend from Hueyapan, the teacher, asked her to decide on one of them and stop going around with both of them. She chose the teacher, but after a long courtship, they didn't marry.

Her boyfriend and his family made great efforts to encourage her to become a school teacher, but her parents didn't allow it. She lost many opportunities to go outside the community, both to work and to study. Two of her friends, however, went to the Teachers' Training School. She remembers how much she cried when they went off to study, while she had to remain in the community.

Nevertheless, her knowledge of the Nahuatl language would lead, in 1966, to her collaboration with anthropologists and linguists. Her first trip to the United States was to spend time at Harvard University, and she would have a similar experience in 1971, but this time to the University of Indiana, where she participated in creating a Nahuatl dictionary. When she had her first opportunity to travel to the United States, she didn't allow her parents to prevent her from going:

When I went, I was older—how old was I? something like 22 years old—and I said: if I'm going to be accepting just anything, I'll never go anywhere. So I told my mother: I'm sorry but this time I'm going, and I'm not going because of money, because she told me: I try to give you everything you need. And I answered: Yes, and I'm very grateful to you, but I'm going for the experience. And, my poor mother—I left her very sad. Especially because—imagine going to the United States, a country that: no, my child, how can you go when we don't know anyone there. No, I said, but here are the references, from the university and everything, and through these things, I managed to convince her. (Doña Elvira)



In 1966 access to the community of Hueyapan was very limited. Mail took a long time, and there were no telephones. Leaving Hueyapan meant leaving behind the security of your family and community, and confronting a totally different world in which there were many *dangers* for a young woman:

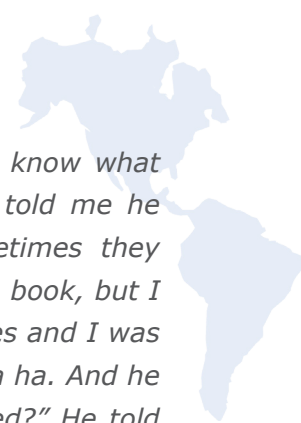
I remember that the first letter I sent her arrived two months later. It took a long time, and everything that could happen, did happen. There was a teacher who was a friend of mine, and I still don't know why, but instead of trying to help her, he tried to make it more difficult, because at that time there was a lot of talk about Las poquianchis, and he goes and tells her: how are you going to let your daughter go there? Don't you know that this and the other are happening? My poor mother—what it did to her! Oh, sometimes it makes me furious. Who would imagine? Did he do it out of jealousy, or resentment? I don't understand. (Doña Elvira)

It was not only her family that was worried, as commented by Doña Elvira: *everyone had doubts about the people*. After her initial experiences, she collaborated with the National Indigenista Institute—now CDI—as well as with the Summer Linguistic Institute (*Instituto Lingüístico del Verano*). A year after the Regional University Center of Tetela del Volcán (*Centro Regional Universitario de Tetela del Volcán—CRUT*) of the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (UAEM) was built, she went to offer her services as a teacher of the Nahuatl language. They opened up a space for her, and formed a group of students, but the salary she received was merely symbolic. She complemented this work by making crafts and attending to the business she ran out of her

own home, selling clothes, hats, belts, woven table mats, embroidered towels and souvenirs. She regrets that none of her children wanted to study a profession, even though they had the opportunity, since attending school was one of her greatest aspirations. She was able to partially fulfill her dreams through the activities she chose to participate in—although they did not completely take the place of those dreams—and even went against her parents' wishes.

Doña Uvalda was born in 1950 and is the mother of nine children. She makes crafts and sells flowers. As an only daughter, she was the focus of great attention as long as her mother was alive. She attended school up to the fifth grade, and never realized exactly how she learned to speak Spanish. She is a person who is very interested in learning new things; she is receptive and open to change. When she learned in 2005 that an academic high school was going to be established in her community, she asked the teachers for permission to attend classes. They allowed her to do so. She has a great love for learning. She was orphaned while still a child, and left to the care of her stepfather, given no support to continue studying. She was obliged to marry at the age of thirteen. She was pretty much yanked out of school to be turned over to her husband. She remembers:

The day I had to leave, I left my books, and cried a lot because I felt that I would never be back. I cried and cried a lot, because I was leaving something behind. I left and then went back again, because I couldn't believe it. The only thing I have from that period of time is my grade card, with all nines and tens. My teacher told me that she would need my books, and I was so sad that I said "noooo, noooo, give them back to me."



I cried so much, and they gave them back to me—like I said, I cried a lot. I cried a lot because they wouldn't give me my grade card, I cried a lot because they wouldn't accept me in the school. Now, I don't cry anymore, now I feel fine, now they talk to me, but I don't care anymore—the most important thing to me is to know. (Doña Uvalda)

Even though her husband and older children questioned her decision, and her neighbors joked about her attending high school classes as an observer, she didn't change her mind, until other circumstances made it necessary for her to leave school behind. Attending the high school classes was a great sacrifice for her, mostly because of the other daily activities she had to fulfill. She regrets not having the opportunity when she was young, and not being able to offer the opportunity to her older children.

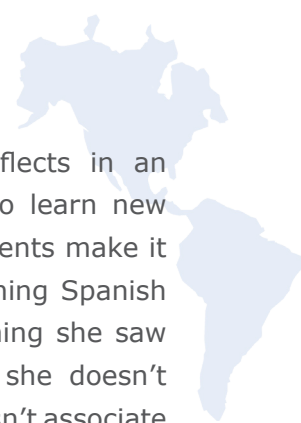
Now I say "no"—they can say whatever they want—my husband told me not to go, and other people said the same. But why wouldn't I go if it's something I love, if it's something I want? I feel just fine. I tell them, from my viewpoint, they're kids [her fellow students]. I feel good about it, it's something I treasure. My husband told me: "no—what do you mean you're going to go?" But it's something that I love, that I want, and I don't plan to lose it. He left me once, for more than 15 days, he was out drinking, and in the afternoons, I was doing what I did. I have some cows, I brought them in, to feed them and bed them down for the night. I have some chickens. I have a lot of work, you know. At night, I had to water, I watered at night. And

no, I wasn't tired. I don't know what happens. My son Pascual told me he was going to read. Sometimes they tell you at school to read a book, but I don't know—just a few lines and I was snoring, I fell asleep, ha ha ha. And he would say: "what happened?" He told me: "Mama, I'm going to read to you." And I told him: "read to me," and he said "you're going to fall asleep." (Doña Uvalda)

She faces the same problems as young people do when they don't really like a subject. She says: *Twice that happened with a history teacher. I felt so sleepy. Yes, I hadn't really slept enough, since I water at night, but that's not the reason.* Her fellow students in the classroom treat her well, and she comments that they're just children, and they don't know anything about life. She gives them advice: *it's good to learn—take advantage of the opportunity you have.* Because of economic reasons, she has sometimes had to miss school. At the end of this study, she was no longer going. Not only was it very difficult for her to learn, to keep up with the rhythm while working at the same time, but:

Now that my kids have grown up, they say: "What are you going to study for? What for?" Today my life is beginning. I have to think about something. Money is always there. I know how to work, I know how to make gabanes, I know how to wash [...] I know how to plant. I know everything—everything. So, yes, money is important, but happiness is more important. There's nothing like happiness. (Doña Uvalda)

What Doña Uvalda experienced, by going to senior high school, is useful in fully appreciating



the potential significance of having access to this level of schooling in the community. “Knowing” is expressed as a form of wealth and happiness. Education linked to these concepts is far from only a means to obtain, for example, a well-paid job. For *Doña Uvalda*, becoming educated is *something you treasure*, since it allows you to access new worlds and *new lives* that have been denied to many: for her kids, for herself. That’s why she encourages others to take advantage of the opportunities they have. Education represents the possibility of *learning* and developing one’s *self*. Regarding her children, she says:

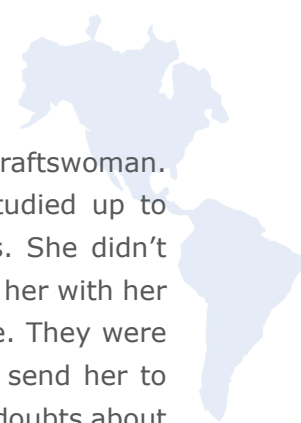
Some had it [an interest in studying] and the truth is that I didn’t make it happen out of ignorance. One of my kids who could have—because of nothing more than a pencil—my neighbor didn’t give me enough for a pencil. Another one of my kids—it was better to work than to not have anything. Another daughter—she’s on the other side [of the border] right now, and her daughters are in places [schools]; she [her daughter], carrying her child, we went out to the fields and she would pick up a stick and say: “what is this called?” [she would take a straw and bend it at four places, and make the shape of an “m”]. This is an “m.” So it wasn’t because there wasn’t a pencil—even with a stick, we drew on the ground. That’s how it was. Once we paid—it was a lot of money at that time—to teach our kids English. One of my kids signed up, but he didn’t go, my daughter went. That day—everything she learned—she was little then, she’s the one who’s on the other side now [in the US]. So, I’ve always been concerned about giving my kids an education, but I never made it happen. (Doña Uvalda)

Doña Uvalda’s way of being reflects in an interesting way her willingness to learn new things, to participate. These elements make it understandable how for her, learning Spanish wasn’t an imposition, but something she saw as natural. She even says that she doesn’t remember how she did it. She doesn’t associate learning another language with any favorable or unfavorable event.

Doña Juanita is of the same generation as *Doña Uvalda*. *Doña Juanita* works at home. She remembers that her grandmother refused to send her to school. Since they didn’t used to go to school, she said: *Why go? It’s useless. You have to work to eat. Are you going to eat your books? You can eat your books*. Even so, she managed to study up to the third grade at the “20 de noviembre” school in the San Felipe neighborhood.

To keep her from going to school, her grandmother tried to keep her busy with other chores. She would tell her: *You have to leave the tortillas made, you have to bring water*. And at that time, you had to grind the corn yourself. There weren’t any mechanical mills then—you had to do it. In order to get ahead on all of these chores, she would prepare the corn mixture at night, and then make the tortillas early in the morning. Then she’d grab the large water pitcher and go to the creek to bring water, making two trips. She would have to hurry. *It always got late for me. That’s how I’d go to school, without having eaten anything, without a penny in my pocket—nothing. I was raised without a father. My mother left me when I was little*.

Doña Juanita had three brothers. Her mother was a single mother. Now, it’s different for children. *Now they receive their money, and they don’t have to do any work. They just study. I studied 8, 9 and 10 years, 11 years, and then I never made it back*. She remembers that some of her classmates cried because they



didn't want to go to school. But she wanted to go, and it was worth it, because she learned something—the basics. There were only two classrooms in the school, and everyone was in those two classrooms. There were only two teachers.

She recalls that only Nahuatl was spoken at home. They didn't speak Spanish, couldn't speak it, and that's how they were raised. They learned Spanish when they were older. At school teachers taught them in Spanish, and even if the teachers knew how to speak in Nahuatl, they didn't during classes. It was very difficult for her to learn in Spanish: *it would be as if they would try to teach kids now in Nahuatl*. Still, she thinks it would be good if they would teach Nahuatl to kids, *even if only a little*, so they would know both languages, *like English and Spanish*. Also, she thinks *that's what the government wants*, and that's why now they are teaching the kids in school to sing and say hello in Nahuatl. Her perception is not incorrect. As pointed out by Bertely, the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI), in its way of operating with respect to institutional responsibility for responding to indigenous rights, views indigenous persons as *subjects of public interest* (2009, p. 182).

Doña Juanita talks about a transformation in her lifestyle in which her everyday activities, knowledge and responsibilities took on new meaning in relation to the knowledge and skills offered through schooling. One of her teachers was actually Doña Elvira, and this may explain why even though her school experience was difficult since the use of Spanish was obligatory, she valued it as important. She learned from teachers from her own community who were familiar with and valued the same culture. This is part of what led her to work so hard to fulfill both her household chores and her school work. One of the concrete results of these efforts was that she learned basic mathematics.

Irma is a *gabanera* and craftswoman. She has three daughters, and studied up to the third grade in the mid-1970s. She didn't have a father, and her mother left her with her grandparents at a very young age. They were the ones who made the effort to send her to school, although they always had doubts about whether it would be worth it. Irma liked school a great deal, never failed a class, and although she says she doesn't know very much, she did learn to read and write, and that is useful to her. As a child, she never had money, but neither did her friends. They went barefoot to school, and didn't wear uniforms, but they didn't see anything wrong with it, since everyone was in the same situation, and they could entertain themselves with almost anything, playing with marbles or *matatena*.

My grandma gave us an early breakfast and said: "time to go." I tell my daughters now that in those days school started at 7:00 in the morning and was over by 2:00 or 2:30. We had more time to do our work at school. Yes, when we got home in the afternoon, when we were a bit older, they'd send us out to carry water, but from what I remember, never while I was going to school. No, because my grandparents never told me I couldn't go to school. We went barefoot, without any money. That's all I can say. We suffered, but we didn't think much of it, because we would ask each other: "did they give you any money?" and the other would say "No, they didn't give me any money." And we'd start to play marbles with other kids, or matatena. We'd play with any old thing, but we never thought about—like now with my daughter—that I have to give her 10 or 15 pesos. But it didn't seem strange to us. There wasn't any money. (Irma) **41**



In addition to the years she studied in elementary school, Irma has always been active in the local group of *gabaneras* in her community. She promoted weaving garments with the backstrap loom, but she also encouraged the use of new techniques by attending courses on dyeing yarn. These courses were offered by what was at that time the National *Indigenista* Institute (now the CDI), which was the agency that hired a teacher to teach them techniques for extracting dyes and collecting the plants used to produce the dyes. Through her efforts, Irma is assuring that the weaving techniques will be preserved, passing them on to her daughters and neighbor girls at an early age. To this end, she organizes classes in which materials are given to the girls and they are assisted in weaving increasingly complex designs, until they can make a *chincuete*—a wool skirt—and the strip of cloth that wraps around to hold it in place.

Although Irma acknowledges that going to school was useful in offering her the necessary tools of reading, writing and math—all of which helps her in selling her products—it is important to reflect upon all the knowledge acquired and reinforced through the processes of making her crafts. This is not school knowledge, but it is clearly organized, sometimes in non-meaningful ways, in biology, chemistry and mathematics curriculums.

Don Raúl is a *campesino* and fruit grower. He produces both peach seedlings and peaches, and also grows corn in smaller amounts. He lives on a plot of land right next to his brothers, on land inherited from his grandparents. He finished the third grade, and then decided to quit school because he was scared to talk with his teacher. He never knew how to answer her, and furthermore, he said: *I didn't really know her*. His school memories are linked to not having any money. He tells how

at the end of the school day, especially Fridays when there was always a street market, he wanted so much what his classmates could buy but he couldn't. All of this made him decide to quit school in the 1970s. Despite it all, he says that what he learned has been useful in his work.

He comments proudly that his oldest son finished junior high school, although his daughters weren't interested in continuing with school. The same was true for his younger son, who went somewhere else to play instead of going to school, he said, to pass the time until it was time to go home. Consequently, he talked with his younger son, and between the two of them, they decided it was best for him to quit school, and instead he went to work, helping his father in the fields. *Don Raúl's* work is not easy. Peaches are only picked once a year, and if he makes about 5,000 pesos from the harvest, for example, that's not enough to live on. That's why he grows corn, so they have something to eat. His work also involves traveling to nearby municipalities, in the states of Puebla and Morelos, to join cooperatives of fruit producers, and with his pick-up truck filled with fruit and peach seedlings, he goes to municipalities farther away where he can obtain greater benefits.

These first five life stories illustrate the school experiences of generations that had access to only the first years of an elementary school education. They reveal the conflicts within families regarding school attendance, in relation to responsibilities for household work. While all of those interviewed acknowledged the importance of the basic knowledge acquired through schooling, this was not the case with respect to school processes. Not all experiences were negative. Some of those interviewed miss their schools, and all of them encourage their children and grandchildren to participate in educational institutions. Each



of these five school trajectories occurred in a context in which groups of teachers arrived in Hueyapan with the aim of *delivering the final blow to the Nahuatl language*, as well as to community traditions and customs. Despite everything that took place, however, resistance in homes was apparent:

Why did they remain so deeply rooted here? despite everything? Even though people were punished for it, they spoke Nahuatl in their homes, and then spoke Spanish out in the street. If they saw the teacher coming, they had to speak Spanish, but they spoke Nahuatl to their children. Somehow, the work carried out by the "civilizing" teachers wasn't 100% successful. [Nahuatl] remained. (Marcelino)

Consistent elements in the life stories told can be seen in unfinished school trajectories, the lack of opportunities, and the negotiations in families around the value placed on everyday and work activities, in relation to the time and costs involved in regular school attendance—added to the uncertain long-term benefits that students might obtain from these educational institutions.

3. A technical junior-high school¹ established

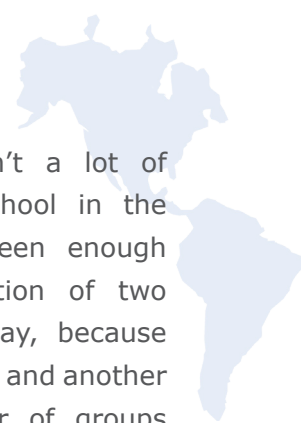
In the early 1980s a trust was created by parents who wanted to see a junior high school established in the community. In the beginning, the junior high school was housed in Hueyapan's local government building, with the ground floor dedicated to classrooms. Space in a near-by home was also used. The administrative office was located in the office of the local government authority, although this led to some problems, since there were

times when the school principal was taken away to deal with matters that, it was said, *he didn't even need to know about*. In response to the need for more space, a meeting room in the *Ejidal* Commissioner's offices was also adapted.

In addition to the trust created, the junior high school principal soon began to add his efforts to the cause. During this process, teachers had to make sure education took place in their classrooms, while the principal was involved in constructing a building, and dealing with all the work necessary to make the new school a reality. He helped by visiting families, going to the Department of Public Education (SEP) offices, and convincing authorities. At that time, according to Adán, a teacher and founder of the school:

We were 15 teachers. We started to work in 1983, and by 1985 or 1986, we moved here. It took two years for the school to be built, and we started to use it before it was finished. There were big, long open spaces without any divisions. I remember that it was very windy and we had to hold down the chalkboard. The students would help hang on to it, so it wouldn't fly away.

As a result of the combined efforts of parents, the principal and authorities, the first class to graduate from junior high was able to do so at the school's own facilities. During the first two years the school was operating, teachers had to walk from Tetela del Volcán to Hueyapan, because there was no public transportation. It took them between an hour and 15 minutes and an hour and a half, and at the very least, 45 minutes. They followed an opening in the forest, where a ravine cut through, crossing it to reach the community.



In education planning, they conducted a study and as a result of its characteristics, they decided it would be a technical junior high school. They started with food preservation and agriculture—those were the two areas.
(Adán, teacher)

In the early years, enrollment in the junior high school was conducted with the help of the teachers, who formed teams and organized themselves to cover the entire community in the search for students:

Lots of parents said they needed their kids to take care of the fields. What about the animals? Who would inherit their belongings? These were their concerns, and this explains why they didn't want to send their kids to junior high. Now, things have changed. Students come on their own. Many of the students from 20 years ago are parents now, and they've changed their ways of thinking. Also, for a few years now, the Oportunidades scholarships make parents become interested in sending their kids to school, and assuring that they don't miss school.
(Adán, teacher)

The problems of a small student population ended in 2000. One of the reasons, according to teachers, was that parents became more conscious of the importance of attending school, plus the *Oportunidades* scholarships made a difference. Now, parents tell their children: *you have to go, my son*, even though many of the adolescents aren't interested in going. This means that *as teachers, we have to work really hard at motivating them.* (César, teacher)

Even though there wasn't a lot of demand for the junior high school in the beginning, there have never been enough classrooms. Currently, construction of two additional classrooms is underway, because one group meets in the laboratory, and another in the library, with the number of groups increasing to 12.

It is likely, according to what teachers have commented, that what facilitated the creation of the technical junior high school in Hueyapan was the fact that during a period of time the establishment of these schools was promoted in communities where people were involved in agricultural work. However, another very important characteristic of the community was ignored, since the school doesn't promote the indigenous culture. Adán and César, both teachers, point out: *what they have is not valued.*

For a period of years after the school was established and operating, some parents still preferred to send their children to study in Tetela del Volcán. There was a lot of mistrust in the technical junior high school, and parents preferred a school that had been operating longer. Following is the experience of someone who did remain in Hueyapan.

Mario, an engineer, received his elementary education at the Carlos A. Carrillo school in the late 1970s. His parents and grandparents were *campesinos*; his father finished third grade and his mother, second grade. His grandfather knew how to read, but his grandmother didn't. Even so, it was his grandmother who helped him and his eleven brothers and sisters establish a routine in which they would get up in the morning, make their beds, sweep the yard, get cleaned up, eat breakfast and leave for school. Of course:



She didn't know anything about doing homework, she didn't know what it was like to read, but when we came home from school, the first thing she asked us was whether we had done our homework. —No, no we hadn't. —Well, then, do it. (Mario)

Mario, who was elected in 2006 to be the municipal president of Tetela del Volcán, was in the first class to graduate from the technical junior high school in Hueyapan. He remembers that people in the community said the following about the junior high school:

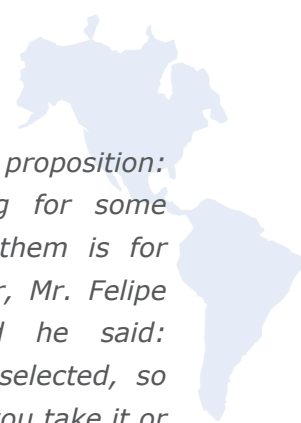
Why are they building that school if it's not good for anything? Well, what I would say is that if it's not good for anything, the results are already in: the first municipal president [of Hueyapan] is from the first graduating class from the junior high school. (Mario)

While there was already a junior high school in the community, Hueyapan didn't yet have, in the 1980s, public transportation to connect it to the municipal seat of Tetela del Volcán. This represented a practical difficulty for young people who wanted to attend senior high school. In addition, there was the precarious economic situation affecting families, preventing these young people from traveling outside of the community to the closest senior high school:

I studied a month in Tetela, at the CBTA, and there were many times when I had to think about whether to walk from the CBTA all the way to Hueyapan, to San Andrés almost at the far end, so to walk and buy me a torta, or to not eat a torta or sandwich, and use public transportation instead, you know? (Mario)

Of course, the fact that it was an agricultural senior high school in Tetela del Volcán seriously reduced the possibilities for those interested in continuing their education to choose what they would study. In order to expand their horizons, they had to go to study in Cuautla or places even farther away, such as Mexico City. That's what Mario did. He studied at the CCH Sur senior high school, and then at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), both in Mexico City. His brothers followed similar paths, with the exception of the oldest among them, who agreed to remain in the community to take responsibility, together with his parents, for working in the fields and the ranch.

We're eleven brothers and sisters, of whom nine of us—well some are finishing their degrees, others are already working in their professions, and one of us just finished senior high school. Of the two who didn't study at the university, one of them decided—since my father has livestock—well, he works in livestock and agricultural activities, so he has land. He decided to make the sacrifice, in a way, to stay and take care of my parents [...] Thank goodness most of us were able to learn a profession, and most of us went to elementary and junior high school here in Hueyapan, except for two of my sisters who went to elementary school, and then, all of their education has been in Mexico City [...] They had to go to a boarding school, and that's where they grew up, and now they're studying for their careers. One of them already finished—she's an industrial engineer, and the other is about to finish her degree in mechatronics—she's the youngest, you could say.



One of my sisters is a nun, and one of my brothers is studying to be a priest.
(Mario)

The social representations of the quality of school institutions in the community have been determining factors. The consolidation of the junior high school over time is reflected in an increase in enrollment and infrastructure, and the use of its facilities to provide courses open to the community, promoted by, for example, the National Institute of Forestry and Agricultural Research (*Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias*—INIFAP) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food (*Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación*—Sagarpa).

4. Promoting a senior high school² and trust in young people

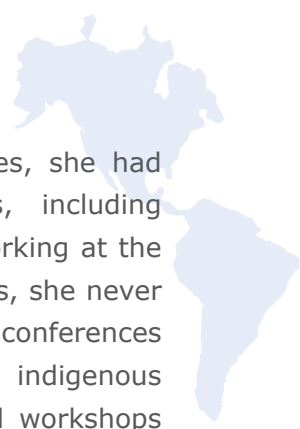
After junior high education came to Hueyapan, it still took over 20 years to establish a senior high school. Up until 2004, youth wanting to continue their studies had no other choice but to travel to the municipal seat or even farther away.

The former municipal authority in Hueyapan, Mr. Noceda, is proud of everything he accomplished during his term, and two activities particularly worth mentioning are: first, the reforestation of woodlands damaged by logging, and second, the most important public works project that he negotiated: the expansion of the municipal government building, which he hoped would receive support from the community, since it involved the opening of something that had been in the works for eight years: a senior high school.

Two months after I started here, we received an official notice from

Cuernavaca with a proposition: "they held a drawing for some schools, and one of them is for Hueyapan." Soon after, Mr. Felipe Sedano arrived, and he said: "Hueyapan has been selected, so what do you say: will you take it or not?" So I asked: "what's needed? We don't have any land." And he said: "no, let's take a look at the schools here, if you'll give us a chance, if you'll accompany us." And I said: "yes." So, we went around and looked at the schools. "How do the schools look to you?" —"Well, it looks complicated to me—there will be problems since some study in the morning and others in the afternoon, and for example, the junior high school looks very good, but the problem is that the students aren't out until 3:00, and you all are going to start early [...] I think we should look here [in the local government building], and what I think is that on the bottom floor there are spaces being used by the authorities, but I think they can move out and we can get organized and set up here." So, we started to look at absolutely everything involved, and he said: "Sounds good." (Ciro Noceda, former municipal authority)

Apart from this being a public works project that *Don* *Ciro* considers to be the pride of his administration and something that he closely participated in, it is also important because the senior high school is one aspect of a positive situation for his community. It opens up possibilities for having more inhabitants in Hueyapan with professional preparation, and for youth to develop their ways of



thinking—something he feels confident will be accomplished without negatively affecting traditional customs.

Maribel was born in 1977, and is the oldest of six in her family, with one brother and four sisters. Her parents are *campesinos*. She lives in the San Bartolo neighborhood in a house built at the top of a hill from where she can look over her orchard of pear and avocado trees and her vegetable plot, with mostly *chilacayote* growing. Most of her house is made of pink-colored cement blocks, with a flat roof made of cement, but her bedroom is separate, made of adobe with a tiled roof. She went to the Justo Sierra elementary school, and started at Hueyapan's Technical Junior High School, but didn't finish. Later, however, she completed an "open-school" junior high program in Cuautla in 2005. Up to that same year, she worked at the taxi stand in the center of Hueyapan, and two days a week she helped teach early education classes in the San Felipe neighborhood. In 2006 she was named the general coordinator of the political campaign for Hueyapan's candidate for the Tetela del Volcán municipal president. The candidate won the election, and in 2007, she was hired as his secretary. She wanted to enroll in the newly-created senior high school, together with her sister Isabel, but work and economic pressures kept her from doing so. She decided to keep her job and help cover the expenses for her sister to attend the school. They agreed that her sister would later help cover her expenses, and so she was waiting for her sister's graduation.

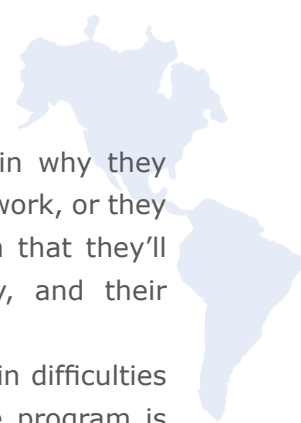
Delia was born in 1979. She went to the 20 de Noviembre elementary school in the San Felipe neighborhood, and then started attending the Hueyapan Technical Junior High School, but finished her junior high education in the open system in Cuautla in the mid-1990s. Her situation was difficult since although she was enthusiastic about

the idea of continuing her studies, she had to work at different activities, including making and selling yogurt and working at the Hueyapan taxi stand. Nevertheless, she never stopped participating in courses, conferences and congresses associated with indigenous issues and in production-oriented workshops at the CBTA. She actively participated in the Totlajtoneljoayotl cultural group promoted by a physician in the community, and with this group she developed and strengthened her knowledge of Nahuatl to the point that, at the age of 26, she had won competitions for storytelling and had become a Nahuatl poet and singer. She had also been recognized at state and national forums and received assistance from *Culturas Populares* to record a CD.

When organizational efforts began in Hueyapan to create a senior high school, Delia decided to enroll. She was one of the students in the first graduating class, even though the education in computers offered at the senior high school is not related to her future interests, since what she really wants is to study music. In the end, when the *Colegio de Bachilleres* was established in Hueyapan through the Long-Distance High School System (*Educación Media Superior a Distancia*—EMSAD), this signified an opportunity for her to combine her studies with her work.

Her experience at the senior high level has been satisfactory, even though she had to be convinced to attend. Now, she values this opportunity available to everyone whose studies were at a standstill for a number of years. One of her classmates is Lucero.

In order for Lucero to enroll in senior high school, she first had to convince her mother. A year had already passed since she finished junior high, and she says that if the senior high school hadn't opened in Hueyapan, she wouldn't have had the opportunity to continue attending school. She has eight



brothers and sisters who are older than she is, and not one of them continued beyond junior high, so she will be the first in her family to graduate from senior high school.

There are many young people like Lucero in the community who see their future limited by two reasons in particular: their parents agreeing to let them continue their studies, and insufficient economic resources to do so. A senior high school teacher pointed out that, among the students in the first classes at the new school were young mothers whose husbands were working in the United States and who were able to leave their children in the child care center so they could go to school.

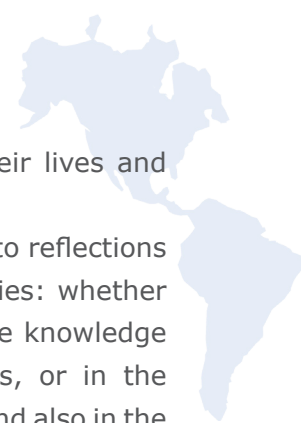
Residents of Hueyapan have contrasting perceptions of the senior high school. Since the school is located in the municipal government building, the place where they have their recess and where they go in between classes is the main town plaza. Some of the students use this time to buy snacks; others organize volleyball games or talk in groups as they sit in the green areas; or they might walk down nearby streets or look at the view from the building's balcony. All of this takes place in full view of residents who come to the town's center, since that's where the taxi stands are and where public transportation vans start their routes. Given this situation, there are some who say that there are never classes, that the students pass all their time out in the plaza, and that they don't study but just play. One woman even said that she heard when a teacher called the students who were scattered around the plaza, and told them that she had looked at the exams sent by the Department and there were topics they hadn't studied during the semester, so they would have to quickly review some things that afternoon. This type of situation is precisely what parents mention when they tell their children that they aren't convinced they should let them attend

the school and when they explain why they think their children should rather work, or they say in the case of young women that they'll end up getting married anyway, and their studies will be useless.

In addition there are certain difficulties associated with the fact that the program is focused on computer training. Internet in the community is slow and expensive, plus unlike in other contexts, students don't have a computer at home and there are very few places that offer a café-internet type service. The teacher in charge of informatics, a graduate of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in Mexico City, comments that the school has enough equipment and the necessary software, but the problem is access to internet—a resource she says is indispensable for teaching.

The resistance felt by inhabitants to accepting the potential benefits from schooling cannot be brushed off easily. One of the reasons is expressed by Bazdresch, who points out that the relationship between education and poverty constitutes an idea generalized in the social imaginary that can be summed up in the following expression: *Education is a path to a better way of life* (2001, p. 65). However, as long as an increase in the population's level of schooling is not interwoven with other aspects, such as the quality of education or job opportunities after graduation, this idea will not cease to be part of a conceptual framework—in which *the role of education is interpreted in its relationship with poverty, inequality, fairness and marginalization* (Ibid, p. 68)—used by the State to legitimize its educational policy strategies.

At the end of the field work for this research, the senior high school was functioning with a stable enrollment of 170 students, assuring the project's continuity. A trust had been organized for building its



own facilities, and those working with the trust managed to obtain land donated by residents for this purpose, suggesting that the school was gradually gaining acceptance. Although Mr. Noceda finished his term in the municipal government without seeing the project's completion, he was confident that the community would elect someone to his post who would continue with the plans.

5. Conclusions: education and social development

Any attempt to identify the value of school institutions in an indigenous community is a complex matter. Through this reconstruction of inhabitants' school experience, we can see that the value attributed to schools in the community has changed from one generation to the next. The conflicts and resistance sparked with the arrival, first of all, of elementary schools, and then re-ignited with the junior high school and finally, the senior high school, are based on the argument that the knowledge obtained at each level does not only fail to correspond to the urgent needs of families, but also affects their culture and the way they are organized. As a result, any benefits that may be derived from schooling appear uncertain, and in any case, are not equal to the costs involved.

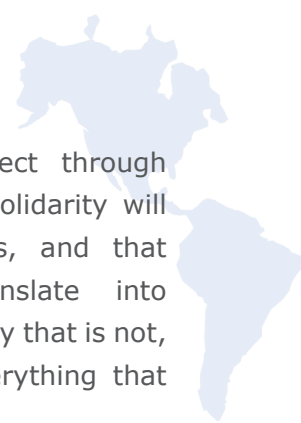
Nevertheless, the life stories told also illustrate latent intercultural relationships, revealing the ways in which individual, families and the community—generation after generation—begin to take ownership in the schools, and to opt for the knowledge imparted and the creative use that can be made of what is offered by these institutions. Some call this development, and others call it a change of mentality. In any case, the fundamental principle is focused on ways in which they interact among themselves and with others

that, it is hoped, will improve their lives and their community.

Each life story contributes to reflections on where the value of schooling lies: whether it lies in knowledge itself, or in the knowledge and skills used in labor activities, or in the construction of one's life project, and also in the construction and reinvention of the community project, in improvements in interaction with government institutions by obtaining public positions, and in general, in people's abilities to interact in different contexts, to their own benefit and that of their community.

If we look back in time, the generation from the 1940s confronted two situations in particular: the limited supply of education in the community, and the minimal support that families offered to enable sons and daughters to attend school beyond the first grades of elementary school. Nevertheless, in retrospect, those interviewed confirmed—in all cases—that they had indeed obtained useful knowledge for everyday life and work life, including reading, writing and basic mathematics. In fact, the majority expressed interest in their own sons and daughters attending school at the basic level. However, when it comes to senior high school, we see that students themselves, in the younger generations, are those who take on the challenge of building their own opportunities to achieve this level of schooling.

The life stories tell how the particular characteristics of individuals influence whether members of their families attend school—from the courage that inspires mothers to work to support their children's education, to the impotence generated by not having coped with *life* in the best manner possible in order to have provided them with schooling, to the agreements reached between brothers and sisters to help each advance toward their educational objectives, and to those who personally take on the responsibility for



covering the costs of their education.

We can see greater change in attitudes toward attending school in the younger generations. Parents have gone from rejecting and hindering school attendance to promoting, first of all, elementary education, and then, junior high education. Nevertheless, resistance to senior high school was still observed when this study was underway, although gradual acceptance was becoming evident through the intervention by young people and local authorities, who saw an opportunity for community development through this level of schooling.

Decisions made by the community and trust placed in their authorities and their students are fundamental. They determine the possibilities for taking advantage of social programs and actions promoted from outside the community to benefit local development. Hope for a transformation in Hueyapan—while maintaining its deeply-rooted traditions—depends on youth who have obtained higher levels of schooling. The recognized influence of educational institutions and the changes promoted through them are linked to a life

project and a community project through which it is hoped that links of solidarity will be maintained among residents, and that community cohesion will translate into maintaining its identity—an identity that is not, however, based on rejecting everything that comes from the outside.

Thus, the changes in mentality hoped for are those based on customs and traditions. While none of the schools are officially organized in line with an intercultural model, the community and its members establish the framework and gradually connect the different perspectives, innovating and creating. Interculturality can be found in the community's future that is constructed with everyone's participation, and organized according to its customs. Consequently, the perceptions of the community's authorities and its residents toward its schools are fundamental for their continuation and transformation: perceptions change to the extent that schools change, and to the extent that schools demonstrate that they are useful for something—that they serve the community.

Endnotes

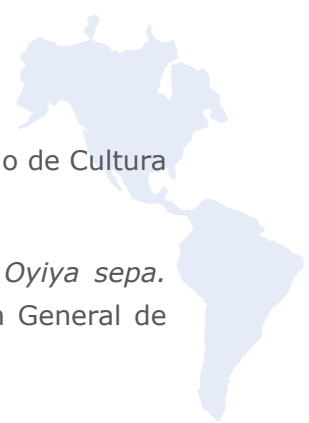
1. Junior high school corresponds to Level 2, or Lower Secondary Education, according to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The standard age for this level in Mexico is from 12 to 14 years of age.
2. Senior high school corresponds to Level 3, or Upper Secondary Education, according to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The typical age for students at this level in Mexico is from 15 to 18 years of age.

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