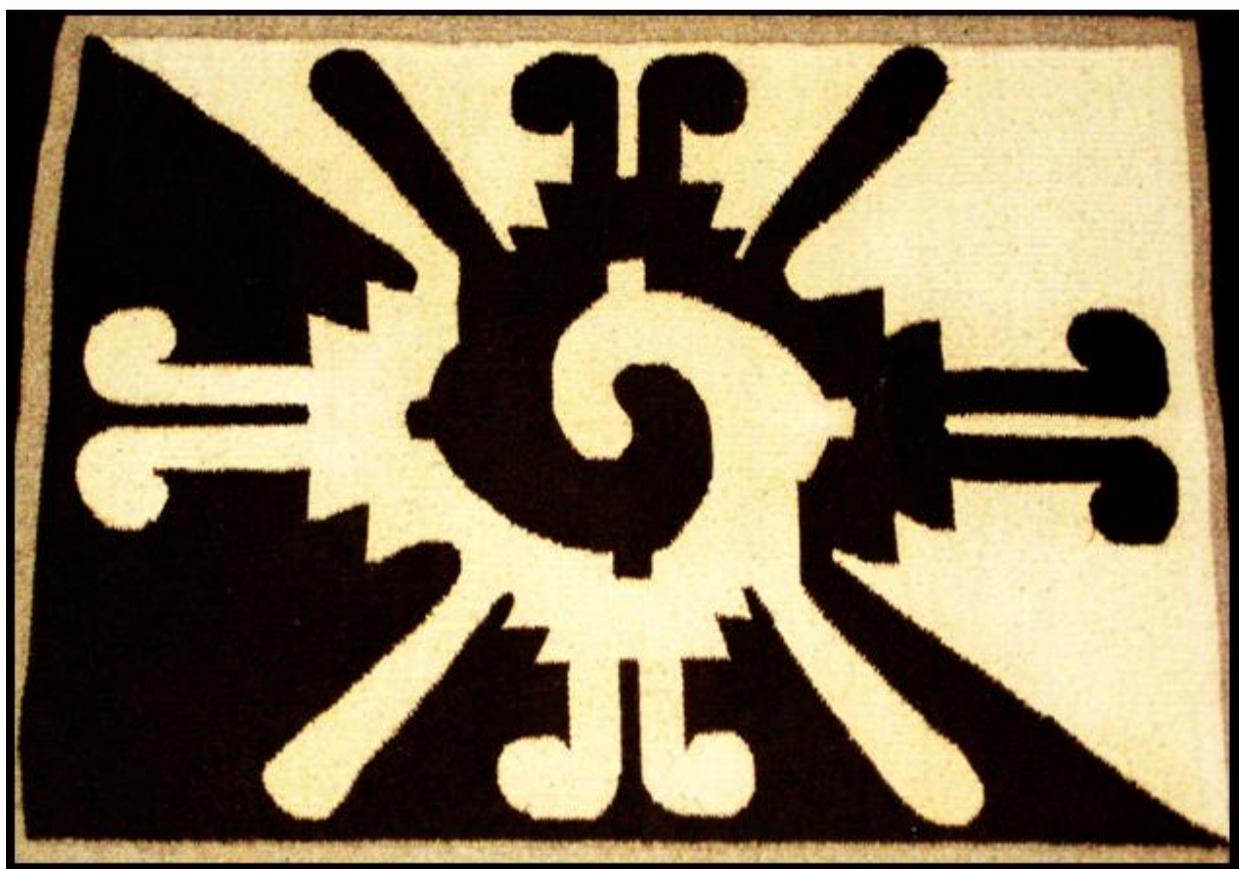


Fighting the System from Within: CMPIO and Education Reform



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ABSTRACT

The current system of public education in Oaxaca is riddled with problems too numerous to list here. There is an obvious need for reform or for a new system all together. The argument presented in this paper is that the latter is not a feasible option for most in Oaxaca, especially for rural indigenous communities. For reasons explained throughout this study, it is necessary to work within the present confines of the existing education system in order to make significant improvements in the quality of education for these communities. Many activists seek to reject “the system” all together, but this paper not only presents a case study of how one organization has managed to make change from *within* this system but also argues that this approach is the only realistic possibility.

I worked with the *Coalición de Maestros y Promotores Indígenas de Oaxaca* (CMPIO), a multi-faceted organization whose mission is to improve education in indigenous communities. In addition to reporting to the State Institute of Public Education in Oaxaca (a government institution), CMPIO is actively involved in the National Union of Education Workers and maintains a separate identity as a non-governmental organization. These three divisions of CMPIO grant it maximum flexibility to fight for the educative rights of all indigenous children. The State pays its bills, the union fights for its concerns, and the NGO grants it the independence needed to develop its own innovative alternatives.

My research methods included both formal and informal interviews with various workers at CMPIO. I regularly attended pedagogical meetings and workshops that they hosted. I also once accompanied two CMPIO pedagogues on a trip to a Chinanteco pueblo in order to observe first-hand the current state of education in a typical indigenous community. Background information was obtained from secondary sources and casual conversations with Benjamín Maldonado, who was an invaluable adviser to this investigation. He is a resident anthropologist of Oaxaca and an expert on indigenous affairs in the state. His impressive experience as a researcher includes collaborative efforts with the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, the *Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas del Gobierno del Estado*, and the *Centro de Encuentros y Diálogos Interculturales*. In the past, he has also served as an adviser to CMPIO.

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

– Paulo Freireⁱ

PREFACE

For the past two and a half months, I have listened to the leaders of many non-governmental organizations, social movements, and other grassroots entities that are seeking to make change in Oaxaca. Some have fought for human rights, others to protect the environment, but what has interested me most is the struggle for better education. There are so many problems inherent in the present public education system— lack of funds, lack of teachers, lack of schools, just to name a few — that it may seem easier to work outside of the system than to try to change it. In fact, that is what many private schools in Oaxaca have chosen to do. This evasion, however, is clearly not a solution within reach of everyone, especially for children living in rural indigenous communities. The Coalition of Indigenous Teachers and Promoters in Oaxaca (CMPIO) has proposed another alternative — to work within the existing education system to make it both more accessible and more accountable to the needs of the marginalized. Indigenous children need better schools with better trained teachers, but their greatest need is access to an education that works within the values and customs of their own community. This type of community-focused learning is best expressed by the Spanish term, *comunalidad*. Through contextualized teaching, CMPIO hopes to make education in indigenous communities not only meaningful but useful.

It is widely assumed that there are only two sources of social change — that which comes from above (big business, government institutions, etc) and that which comes from below (grassroots organizations and social movements), but CMPIO has found an effective compromise between the two.

It is dually grassroots and governmental. The objective of this paper is to present a case study of how CMPIO's double identity has allowed it to work within the constraints of the system in order to change that system from within. The majority of the information for this investigation came from actively observing CMPIO's various meetings and activities, including a two-day workshop on language nests and a trip to a Chinanteco pueblo in order to observe first-hand the current state of education in a typical indigenous community. I also conducted several formal interviews with different leaders of the coalition. Other information came from informal interviews and secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

Institutionalized education has historically been a repressive force that has in some cases come dangerously close to eradicating entire indigenous cultures. Out of all the impositions forced on the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, the homogenization of local cultures to meet globally accepted economic and cultural standards has caused the most harm. This reductionist trend derives from a systemic progression towards modernization, globalization, and other such "zation" words that inevitably cause harm when the interests of local communities are left out of the picture. The devaluation of indigenous culture is nothing new in Mexico. Since the advent of the Spanish conquest, one of the main functions of state institutions has been the *castellanización* of indigenous populations. Public education was and is the most effective government tool used to stamp out indigenous languages and customs, all for the purpose of propagating some "nationalistic" identity. In other words, this imposition of "Mexican" monoculture in many communities has truly equated to a sort of ethnocide. It has become increasingly obvious that there is a great need to resist these forces of cultural homogenization in order to preserve a diversity of cultural identities. One of the first targets of reform should be education.

Today's Education

The general quality of Mexican public education should be described as nothing more than abysmally low. According to one study by the Programme for International Student Assessment, only 0.3 percent of Mexican students appear ready to compete in a global world.ⁱⁱ What is worse, the

number of primary school children abandoning their studies for the job market is steadily growing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Less than 23 percent of youth between the ages of 19 and 23 complete some level of higher education.

^{iv} Such is the state of education at the national level, but the local picture in Oaxaca is far worse. Over the past few decades, Oaxacan students have consistently placed in the bottom three states academically. Many Oaxacan communities lack such basic necessities as school breakfasts and well-constructed schools. One CMPIO worker criticizes the government for not providing sufficient resources for education, an explicit obligation under the Mexican constitution. According to him, the government is quick to make commitments to education, but rarely are they fulfilled. “It is total discourse, because the reality is something else. There are communities that do not have roads or medical services, much less schools.”

There are many factors that have lead to the current educational impasse, among them a lack of effective leadership, a scarcity of funds, and an inadequately diverse curriculum. In terms of leadership, the education system has been pulled in every direction by various dissenting factions within the National Union of Education Workers (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* or SNTE).¹ The competition between Oaxaca’s two competing factions, Sections 22 and 59, has managed to siphon attention away from the needs of the students in favor of the needs of the teachers, themselves. Teachers from both sections, especially from Section 22, have spent numerous hours away from their classrooms, so much so that some have been accused of abandoning their students for personal interests.² True or not, the fact remains that union leaders at the national level have failed to reign its many moving parts in order to address the many problems within the education system itself.

¹ The National Education Workers Union (SNTE) of Mexico has over 950,000 members, making it the largest trade union in Latin America. When it formed in 1949, it was closely linked with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), but in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s it underwent structural reforms to insure a more democratic management. Today, the SNTE is composed of sections located geographically throughout the country. The current leader, Elba Esther Gordillo, has been in charge since 1989. Because of the influence she has been able to maintain over each president during her tenure, many believe she is the most powerful woman in Mexico.

² Section 22, nationally recognized as part of the SNTE, has been at the forefront of educational reform in Oaxaca for decades. When they aligned with the APPO in 2006 and abandoned their classrooms to strike, some teachers left Section 22 to return to their teaching. Those who chose to defect created Section 59 with government backing. To

Another problem is a lack of funding. For the year 2008, the State Institute of Public Education in Oaxaca (*Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública de Oaxaca* or IEEPO)³ expects a deficit of 3 billion pesos (about \$286,000,000 USD).^v Right now, families must chip in a “voluntary donation” in order for their students to enjoy such basic luxuries as photocopies and electricity. Many families, especially those in indigenous or *campesino* communities, can barely even afford to allow their sons or daughters to attend class when those children could be earning money, much less some additional cost. A feebly led and poorly funded education system are strong contributing factors to the current situation in Oaxaca, but the greatest cause of academic underperformance here is actually what is being taught.

Students in Oaxaca, especially those from small, indigenous communities, have historically been denied access to an education designed to fortify their own cultural practices and, in many cases, their own native languages. The root of the problem is the standardized curriculum imposed year after year by the Secretary of Public Education (*Secretaría de la Educación Pública* or SEP), an institution infamous for overlooking important regional differences. The educational needs of students in Mexico City are not the same as those in indigenous and *campesino* communities in Oaxaca. This fact becomes exceedingly clear when students speak a different language than the one in which their textbooks were written. One of the greatest unmet needs in Oaxaca today is community-based education. Traditional, institutionalized education has failed to recognize the diverse population of students for which it was meant to serve. For that reason, small communities across the state are reclaiming control over their children’s education, something they first lost long ago to the Spanish and again more recently to the Mexican government. A new philosophy has taken root: *comunalidad*.

The Concept of *Comunalidad*

this day, members of Section 22 see Section 59 as nothing but a government tactic to stifle the teachers’ movement. Section 59 has never been officially recognized by the SNTE.

³ In 1992, when the federal government transferred the responsibility for providing for basic education to the states, the IEEPO became the operative educational institution in Oaxaca. Today, it is in charge of the state budget for public education.

To find out more about the ideas behind *comunalidad*, I spoke with Benjamín Maldonado, a local anthropologist who has published much on the topic. In his lengthy article, *Los Indios en las Aulas (Indians in the Classrooms)*, he had described *comunalidad* as “the essence of being Indian, as expressed both through the desire to be collective and through conceiving of both life and governance in this manner.”^{vi} In our discussions, he told me the term *comunalidad* is fittingly Oaxacan. Its rough translation into English is *communality*, but there is no real English term that entirely captures the all that *comunalidad* implies. According to Juan José Rendón, *comunalidad* is made up of four central elements (territory, work, power, and celebrations) and many complementary elements (language, religion, traditional knowledge, etc).^{vii} For example, most indigenous lands are owned communally. Work responsibilities are shared and are normally unpaid. Power is held collectively in the hands of each member of the community, and decisions are made by a process of consensus. Even during parties and celebrations, all are invited to take part.

In other words, almost all aspects of life in indigenous communities are collective. Each member has certain duties to fulfill to help the community prosper. Benjamín stressed, however, that participation in indigenous society is considered to be more voluntary than obligatory. I later found this sentiment echoed in one of his books. He writes,

Here is a synthesized idea of *comunalidad*: as part of *comunalidad*, indigenous people express a desire to be part of the community, a desire which is not simply out of obligation. It is a feeling of belonging: to fit in is to belong to something that is their own; being a real and symbolic element of a community means being part of *all* that is that community; part of *comunalidad* implies an expression and recognition of belonging to a general collective.^{viii}

For an indigenous person, culture is not only an inheritance but a treasured identity to be *chosen* above all other forms of identity. *Comunalidad* encompasses more than how a community identifies itself, however. It is also how a community *functions*. Benjamín’s same book reads, “*Comunalidad* is a way to name and to understand Indian collectivism. It is more than a fondness for that which is communal; it is, in reality, the structural composition of indigenous villages. It is the logic within which the social

structure functions, and it is the form within which social life is defined and articulated.”^{ix} In short, there can be no community without *comunalidad*.

Comunalidad and Education

One of the expressed goals of CMPIO is the *comunalización* of education. It is the process of incorporating the local knowledge, customs, and language of a community into the classroom in order to help students draw meaningful relations between the material being taught and their daily experiences. In the words of one indigenous person, *comunalidad* supports “an education that is in our own hands, guided by our own decisions in our own languages. It is in accordance with our own traditions, grounded in the community and structured in accordance with our own concepts of space and time. It is led by advisors that we, ourselves, have chosen.”^x A movement towards *comunalidad* in education would revitalize a community’s own traditions by fostering an appreciation and understanding of them in the classroom. Unfortunately, the prevailing trend is for schools to teach

<i>Ti bia' nachudé nexhe' lade chupa Laa nga naca ti bixidu'.</i>	<i>La distancia más corta entre dos cuerpos</i>	<i>The shortest distance between two bodies</i>
<i>Ti bia' dxandipe' nayúlaxhaata', Laa nga guendausiaanda'.</i>	<i>es un beso. La más larga,</i>	<i>is a kiss. The longest,</i>
<i>Biá'si galahui'cani Zuhuaa guendarietenala'dxi'.</i>	<i>el olvido. El punto medio es el recuerdo.</i>	<i>the forgotten. The middle point is remembrance.</i>

Poem originally written in Zapotec from the Istmo de Tehuantepec by Enedino Jiménez. I have translated it into English.

curricula that are, for all intensive purposes, completely unconnected to the daily realities of a community. Gustavo Manzano Sosa, a member of the pedagogical committee at CMPIO, described to me the great need to bridge this gap. “You should not make a separation between the school and the community, which is what is happening now. The school teaches one thing, and in the community they teach another. A Mexican boy that finishes school and is left alone in a community will be lost, because he did not learn to live alone there. A boy that does not study but that has always lived in his pueblo will end up learning more, because from that same place he learns to value being alone.”

Important Laws on the Books

Among the federal, state, and municipal levels of the Mexican government, there is a mountain of legislation regarding education. I have chosen what I believe to be the three most pertinent in terms of the possibility of legally integrating *comunalidad* into education: Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution, the Oaxacan State Law on Education, and the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents for the State of Oaxaca.

Article 3 of the Constitution

The writers of the Mexican constitution clearly valued education as one of the most important responsibilities of the Mexican government. The opening lines of Article 3 of the Constitution read, “Every individual has the right to receive education. The Government - Federal, State, and Municipal-- will provide preschool, primary, and secondary education. Primary and secondary education are compulsory.”^{xi} Section 5 of Article 3 goes on to specify, “All education provided by the State will be free of charge.”^{xii} Thus, all Mexicans are guaranteed a free education up through secondary school, but what *kind* of education is being guaranteed? Section 2 of Article 3 continues, “Furthermore: It shall be democratic, considering democracy not only a judicial structure and a political regimen, but also a system of life based on the constant economic, social, and cultural betterment of the people.”^{xiii} This is a potential opening for promoters of an education grounded in *comunalidad*, which is a parallel system of life based on the same premises listed above. The communalization of education is, in essence, exactly what this law protects: an education molded to meet the constant economic, social, and cultural needs of the people through education. According to Section 3 of Article 3, however, “the Federal Executive will determine the plans and programs of primary, secondary, and post secondary education for the entire Republic.”^{xiv} Despite this section’s claim that “the Federal Executive will consider the opinions of the governments of federated entities and of the various social sectors involved in education,” management of education remains largely undemocratic.^{xv} Major decisions are made at the federal level with little to no consultation by teachers in small communities.

Ley Estatal de Educación de Oaxaca

The unmet educational promises of the Constitution dissatisfied teachers throughout the country. Tensions grew between the SNTE and the federal government, and by the early 1990s it became apparent that reform was needed. In May of 1992, both signed the National Agreement to Modernize Basic Education (Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica or ANMEB). In the next few years, Mexico would see considerable decentralization of its public education. States across the country seized the opportunity to shape their own education policy, and Oaxaca was no exception. In 1995, Oaxaca passed the State Education Law (Ley Estatal de Educación or LEE) of Oaxaca. It was an exhaustive and collaborative effort. Parents, teachers, researchers, authorities, students, and congressmen all participated in the formation of the law, which outlines what they believe should education should be. Article 2 of the LEE defines education in these terms:

It is a social process which acquires, transmits, interchanges, creates, and enriches culture and knowledge in order to achieve the integral development of each person, family, and society. It permits the educated to remake themselves economically and socially; to reevaluate, to preserve, and to defend their cultural and national identity, values of justice, democracy, liberty, and solidarity; and to protect the environment.^{xvi}

Though there were many contributors to the LEE, according to Benjamín Maldonado, “The obligation of the State to respect and foster *comunalidad* (as elevated by the nature the law) is thanks to the propositions and pressures of the Oaxacan teachers.”^{xvii} He continues, “In this law, which to a great extent complies with the demands of the teachers, indigenous education has an important place and *comunalidad* is given respect for the first time in a state law.”^{xviii}

Many important changes were proposed, one of which included the development of a teacher training system designed to produce educators who would be more aware of the educational realities in the state; the need for indigenous education and native language development was listed as one such reality. When the state set up the *Escuela Normal* to train teachers, there was a great potential to develop teachers who would possess a deep consciousness of *comunalidad*. Unfortunately, the new programs for teacher training were co-opted into the education politics of the federal government.

Those representing the Secretary of Public Education (Secretaría de la Educación Pública, or SEP) were the only ones consulted.⁴

Another ground-breaking proposition of this law was its specific treatment and guidance of bilingual education, which is addressed in Article 7:

It is the obligation of the State to impart bilingual and intercultural education for all indigenous communities, with plans and curricula that integrate the knowledge, technology, and value systems that correspond to the cultures of that ethnicity. This teaching should be imparted in their maternal language as well as in Spanish as a second language.^{xix}

This article further specifies that Spanish should be used only to improve communication between communities but should never eclipse the use of local languages. Once again, however, it seems these promises are worth only the paper on which they were written. Textbooks and other course materials continue to be produced in large quantities only in Spanish.

Ley de Protección de los Derechos de los Niños, Niñas, y Adolescentes para el Estado de Oaxaca

This law was passed on September 4, 2006 by the Oaxacan state legislature. It was written to rework and amplify existing legislation that already addressed the development and protection of human rights for Oaxacan youth. Although this law addresses youth rights in general, Chapter 5 relates specifically to their educational rights. Chapter 5, Article 34 of this law both confirms and modifies Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution: “[All children] have the right to an education that is free, dignified, effective, and of quality; one in which the dignity and integrity of children and adolescents are respected; one which promotes their beliefs and personal opinions, their skills, abilities, and dexterities of learning, and their personal development.”^{xx} In terms of education specific to indigenous children, however, the law fails to make much mention. Chapter 5, Article 39.1 states that one of the objectives of education should be, “to promote the acceptance and respect of diverse cultures and ways of thinking,” but this does not specifically address indigenous cultures or languages.^{xxi} Nonetheless, a

⁴ The SEP was formed in 1921 as an extension of the federal government’s attempt to consolidate power after the Mexican Revolution.

certain appreciation of diversity is clearly communicated, which is one step away from the homogenizing institution that public education has been in the past. Perhaps in the years to come, this newly-passed legislation will help Oaxaca progress towards community-based education.

Ch. 1. THE CMPIO

The best way to defend public education against a wave of privatization is to elevate its quality. This is our intention and our promise: to build educational alternatives through the pedagogical movement using a unionized and popular perspective and, above all, the communal vision of the original pueblos.^{xxii} (CMPIO's mission statement)

Since the early 1970's, teachers have joined together in a movement to fight for the educative rights of indigenous children. Since its formation in 1974, the Coalition of Indigenous Teachers and Promoters of Oaxaca (Coalición de Maestros y Promotores Indígenas de Oaxaca), more commonly referred to as CMPIO, has been a major leader in this struggle. CMPIO began as a branch of the Institute of Investigation and Social Integration of Oaxaca (Instituto de Investigación e Integración Social de Oaxaca or the IIISEO) which sought to recruit and develop teachers for indigenous children. Throughout the late 1970's and early 1980's, IIISEO established the foundations of formal bilingual education. As part of a greater movement toward community-based education, CMPIO began as an organization that sought to liberate the indigenous population through education and to defend and protect the indigenous teachers in those communities. Today, CMPIO represents over 1,000 indigenous teachers in 24 different zones throughout the state of Oaxaca and remains the oldest active Oaxacan indigenous organization.

Structure of CMPIO

I sat down with Gustavo Manzano Sosa to interview him about the complex structure and identity of CMPIO. Gustavo works at CMPIO as a pedagogue, coordinator of political activities, and treasurer. He sees himself as a union man above all else, and is proud to be the nephew of Flavio Sosa,

popular leader of the APPO.⁵ He has been with CMPIO for over 8 years. I first asked him to describe the basic structure of CMPIO. As it turns out, it is anything but basic. “CMPIO has three branches. We are a *jefatura* of IEEPO, we are a union delegation of Section 22, and we are a non-governmental organization.” Its three divisions, he assured me, all play an important, distinct role in CMPIO’s efforts to better the education of indigenous children in Oaxaca.

Jefatura of the IEEPO

As a *jefatura* of the State Institute of Public Education in Oaxaca (IEEPO), CMPIO can address its concerns about education through a government institution. The IEEPO reports to the Secretary of Public Education (SEP), which makes all executive decisions about education at the federal level. The *jefatura* division of CMPIO is the most administrative of the three. For example, CMPIO workers who work mostly in the *jefatura* division deal with questions of finances and personnel. The *jefatura* aspect of CMPIO is also considered to be the most official of its three divisions, meaning the division of CMPIO most tied to government affairs and to the government payroll.

Delegation of Section 22

CMPIO is also part of Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). The SNTE is considered a strong force in Mexican politics, and Section 22 is one of its largest and most radical delegations. There are over 70,000 Oaxacan teachers that participate in Section 22, but through its relatively democratic structure, it works to make sure all of its unionists are heard. Section 22 has a distinct, bureaucratic structure. According to Gustavo, “All of the proposals from below go upwards through the structure like a chain.” At the very top is a board of directors (*la dirigencia*). Below the directors are a league of *sectoriales*, who serve as liaisons between the various delegations and the directors. There are 744 delegations, of which CMPIO is but one. When a delegation like CMPIO wants to raise an issue within Section 22, the delegation’s secretary general will mention it during *asambleas*

⁵ The People’s Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, or APPO) is an all-inclusive grassroots movement formed both to remove a repressive governor and to create a new, more democratic power structure in Oaxaca. In 2006, the teachers were at the forefront of this movement, and they remain so today.

estatales, which are attended both by the *sectoriales* and by the secretary generals of other delegations. The presiding secretary general of CMPIO, Eustolia Mateos Luna, currently represents all 1,049 members of CMPIO.

As a product of its loyalty to and participation within Section 22 of the SNTE, when the union launched a massive teachers' strike in 2006, CMPIO joined in. What began as a march and an encampment in the city's Zócalo evolved into a full-blown citizens' movement to reshape how Oaxaca would be governed. Out of the chaos rose the People's Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, or APPO). When I asked Gustavo about the relationship between CMPIO teachers and the APPO, he replied, "We, as CMPIO and as a delegation to Section 22, are part of the APPO." Though CMPIO strongly identifies with the APPO and Section 22's on-going fight, it has its own rich history of activism that dates long before both the APPO and Section 22. "CMPIO has a history of fighting for over 30 years, like 34 years. CMPIO began its fight much before Section 22 did. At the beginning, CMPIO spent its first 8 years independent from the Section," said Gustavo proudly. Despite its independent origins, however, today CMPIO is considered by many as more of a union follower than its own entity. Gustavo explains, "In the year '82, the delegation was formed and we integrated with Section 22. Now, what they say about CMPIO is that it has fallen in line." He said it was important to remember, however, that eight of CMPIO's own teachers have been killed so far alongside others from Section 22 and should be equally seen "as political fighters, as social fighters."

Whereas CMPIO's *jefatura* division serves a basic administrative function within the IEEPO, the delegation to Section 22 is politically charged, actively fighting for changes in how the government treats indigenous education. There is a certain tension in the relationship between these two divisions, whose respective functions are to collaborate with a government institution (the IEEPO) and to pressure government institutions to change. Gustavo explains this dynamic: "The work of the *jefatura* is more administrative. It has to do with personal directors, with everything official that is the IEEPO, with

everything that is the ‘school.’ The official division will have nothing to do with the political because they are two things in constant contention.”

Non-Governmental Organization

Others tensions within CMPIO stem from grouping so many people together from so many parts of the state. Gustavo explains,

It is the form that has kept us united. It is how we have helped ourselves to stay together, because there are certain occasions where our same government, our same IEEPO, has tried to divide us within CMPIO or within the *jefatura*. Because we are located in every region of the state, they want to break us up. That is to say, if we have schools on the coast, they want those schools to integrate with the *jefatura* of the coast. If our schools are in the Mixteca, they want them to integrate with the *jefatura* of the Mixteca. Every region has its *jefatura*, and we, as a *state jefatura*, may be located here in Oaxaca, but we have schools throughout the entire state. That said, we continue united.

CMPIO’s identity as an *asociación civil* (non-governmental organization) serves to keep CMPIO unified.

Given both its geographic range and the divisive forces it faces daily from the government and from within its other two divisions, being classified as a non-governmental organization insures a common neutral identity that can keep all its members together.

The NGO division of CMPIO also oversees the Pedagogical Movement. Formed about 12 years ago, the Movement has following objectives: 1. To strengthen indigenous languages and cultures, 2. To communalize education, 3. To strengthen the presence of science in schools, 4. To humanize education, 5. To promote agricultural production while conserving the environment and natural resources, and, lastly, 6. To strengthen the presence of art and technology in indigenous schools.^{xxiii} CMPIO plans to achieve these objectives by creating alternatives that respond to the educational conditions and needs of the youth and communities of the original indigenous pueblos. Their work is pedagogical in nature because their main focus is on developing culturally relevant teaching methods, subject matter, and didactic materials. CMPIO lists the following as four problems which teachers of indigenous education must confront: “1. A lack of plans and programs where linguistic and cultural diversity is recognized, 2. A lack of a pedagogy for teaching a first and second language, 3. A loss of identity that has both fueled

resistance from some teachers and parents to the use of indigenous languages and worsened the devaluation of their own culture, and 4. A system of training for teachers that does not prepare them for communal, bilingual, and intercultural education.”^{xxiv} Today, CMPIO has designed a course for new teachers called the *Curso de Induccion para los Docentes* (Induction Course for Teachers) in which it hopes to give the teachers the tools to address these problems.

Politics of CMPIO

CMPIO is intricately linked to the IEEPO and, therefore, to the government. The most tangible link between CMPIO and the IEEPO is financial. All salaries within CMPIO are paid for by the IEEPO. Even Gustavo was willing to admit, “All of us and all of the workers within Section 22 say that our patron is the IEEPO, because the IEEPO pays us.” This relationship, however, does not prevent CMPIO and the other members of Section 22 from marching against the government with increasing frequency and growing intensity. Section 22 has the privileged position of being one of the few groups powerful enough to force the government into making occasional reforms. Gustavo said, “The plight with the government has always existed. We call it a war. The only organization and the only section that has scared the government, that can force the government to sit down at its table, is Section 22.”

Advantages and Disadvantages of Being Part of Section 22 of the SNTE

Given its size and complexity, there are bound to be both advantages and disadvantages inherent in being a part of the SNTE, but the greatest benefit to CMPIO must be its access to such a powerful force of social change. Gustavo gave me a bit of history: “Section 22 is the largest in Latin America and is the most combative that there is. First, it carries the longest history of fighting – more than 20 years to its movement. This mobilization has always been seen as something social and something political, but it has always stood specifically for the students and for the schools.” In the face of today’s great need for education reform, the SNTE serves as the best equipped group to fight for the that reform. History shows that the Mexican government acts only when pressured to do so. For as

long as the SNTE has existed (since the early 1940s), teachers have taken to the streets to voice their demands.

In recent years, different sections within the SNTE have exercised other methods of activism, including encampments in public areas, highway blockades, and hunger strikes. Section 22's great strike and encampment in 2006 has been the most significant political move ever made by the Section. Though many say Section 22 failed because, after government repression, many teachers simply went back to teaching, Gustavo sees the benefit of protest. "We succeeded in creating a consciousness in many people, not in everyone, but many people changed their way of thinking. Some said to me, 'How great, teacher! I used to have closed eyes. Now I know differently. They opened my eyes and now I know the government is harming us.'" He also explained other achievements CMPIO has made as part of Section 22. "As part of the union, CMPIO has achieved many things – the provision of many didactic materials for the children, school breakfasts, scholarships – but all of that we achieved through fighting. We have not been following behind the government. The government says to the communities, 'Okay, here you go, here you go. I, as the government, I give this to you.' But no, they are in the fight behind us. It is us whom they follow." For CMPIO, the greatest advantage of being part of Section 22 is that it can join forces with a powerful organization willing to fight for a mutual cause.

Gustavo spoke with such pride about CMPIO's role in Section 22 that I was hesitant to ask him about possible downsides to being a part of the union. When I did ask, he answered, "There are practically no disadvantages. There are more advantages to being part of the union because there is a lot of power when there is such unity." After a brief pause, however, he found a different answer: "An excess of marches. When there are many marches and many encampments, the educational environment is harmed. We neglect our students. We begin to irritate parents and authorities – they certainly do not like it." According to many casual conversations I have had with local Oaxacans, the greatest criticism of Section 22 is, in fact, a perceived excess of marches. The teachers are caught in a difficult situation. As teachers, their job is to instruct, but to receive the basic materials and support

they need to impart that instruction, they have to march. That often translates to temporarily leaving their classrooms and their students behind.

In any case, the particular methods chosen by Section 22 (long marches, road blocks, encampments, etc) have rubbed many Oaxacans the wrong way, especially the parents of students whose education has been interrupted. On May 1st, National Workers' Day, CMPIO accompanied teachers from Section 22 as they joined thousands of marching workers to voice their demands. After walking around the Zócalo and observing the various unions present, I asked a Oaxacan women in a nearby coffee shop what she thought of the teachers' protest. As a mother of two, she said she strongly disagreed with it. "If they really cared about the education of their students, they would not abandon their own classrooms. The month of May⁶ is just an excuse for teachers to have a month of vacation while they ask for higher salaries."

I wrote down what she said and shared it with Gustavo. Calmly, he told me that, yes, one of the reasons for marching is to fight for better wages, but not the only one. "We march, too, in order to awaken the people, to let them know why there is a march and why there is a struggle. It is our fault because we do not inform or warn the people. We go out to march, but we do not tell the people first. We do not tell them that we are coming, nor what we want by marching, what objectives there are, and what we have achieved through marching in the past. In many occasions, we ignore them." There seems to be an obvious need for greater communication between Section 22 and the people of Oaxaca, and perhaps Section 22's methods are not the best way to engage the general populace. That said, these methods have, in the end, brought much needed attention to the often ignored issues of Oaxacan education.

⁶ May is generally the fiercest month of the year for the teachers' movement because National Teachers' Day falls on May 15. Every year on National Teachers' Day, the teachers' union presents a list of demands to the Oaxacan government. As the government is usually slow to respond, the union sets up a *plantón* (encampment) in the Zócalo and threatens to stay until each demand is addressed.

2. CMPIO TEACHERS UNITED FOR CHANGE

There is something different about CMPIO teachers. From a conversation I had Lois Meyer, an American professor and pedagogue who has served as an adviser to CMPIO for over 9 years, I learned how fellow teachers view their CMPIO counterparts. “They are so disciplined, so driven,” Lois said, “that new teachers are both awed by CMPIO and scared to be a part of it at the same time.” CMPIO teachers have taken the challenge of improving indigenous education into their own hands by working overtime to improve their teaching. Multiple hours are spent upgrading lesson plans and designing innovative classroom materials. Their efforts merit even more praise when you consider that they are not paid for this extra work.⁷ The teachers of CMPIO recognize the value of their volunteered time, however, and they embrace the passion of their *compañeros* as one of the fundamental differences between CMPIO’s teachers and those of any other *jefatura*. Gustavo expressed it this way:

“To be here in CMPIO, you have to be different. What we bring to CMPIO is *comunalidad* that is *tequio* (community service) and that is *guelaguetza* (reciprocity). Whatever would help in a community is what we do here in CMPIO. To the CMPIO worker, a daily work schedule means nothing... That is one of the differences between us and other *jefaturas*.”

Based on the concept of *comunalidad*, each CMPIO teacher views himself or herself as an integral contributor to the group as a whole, just as an indigenous person would to his or her own pueblo. There are different *jefaturas* in different zones, but CMPIO is has the reputation of being collaborative - in other words, to feel indigenous with pride. This communal philosophy gives way to CMPIO’s greatest strength: unity.

Community-Inspired Education

Another distinct difference between CMPIO and the other *jefaturas* is the Pedagogical Movement, briefly mentioned above. One of the principal objectives of the Pedagogical Movement is to create a culturally-contextualized education that takes into account the opinions of local authorities,

⁷ In Mexico, the law that states that no one must work for more than 40 hours in a week; for those that choose to work more, they do so without compensation.

parents, and students. It emphasizes reinforcing the body of knowledge that already exists in the community rather than focusing on whatever a textbook has to offer. Without contextualizing the course books, which were written for “regular” Mexican students, indigenous students have trouble making connections. Gustavo said, “It is like giving them an example in English. They are not going to understand it.” For that reason, it is one of CMPIO’s specific pedagogic objectives to base education on the students’ communities by using examples drawn from the students’ own lives.

The most effective way to make education more accessible to indigenous students, however, is to present the material in their native language, but bilingual education in Oaxaca is a complex issue. The sheer number of indigenous languages spoken in the state – no less than 16 – creates two main challenges: producing didactic materials in each language and training enough teachers to cover every language. State funding, at least historically speaking, has not been sufficient enough to adequately address either challenge. Another complication is trying to develop a basic teaching strategy for bilingual education. When I asked Gustavo if one existed, he replied, “We are still looking. It is difficult to achieve that, because it is a fight against the system and against that which is ‘official.’” Bilingual teachers are pioneers looking for an alternative that has yet to be fully explored.

CMPIO currently has two projects designed to help indigenous children recapture their native languages. One project centers around the *nido de lengua*, a language nest where native-speaking elders spend time with young children and immerse them in that language. The other is the *Curso de Inducción para los Docentes*, a year-long program designed to help train new indigenous teachers to be more effective by incorporating the concept of *comunalidad* into their classrooms. Both projects will be described in chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

3. NIDOS DE LENGUA

Language nests officially originated in New Zealand, where the indigenous Maori decided to take action against the quickly accelerating displacement of their indigenous language by the more dominant English imposed by their colonizers. In the early 1900s, English colonizers banned any teaching in Maori

in New Zealand schools. The use of Maori and the practice of aboriginal culture were socially discouraged. Like other indigenous people in colonized areas around the world, the Maori grew ashamed of their language and culture over time. They began leaving their communities to find jobs in the city, where they lost touch with their linguistic roots. Because of these migratory trends, by the 1960s and 1970s the Maori people were left with a diminishing population of aging native speakers.

In 1982, the Maori elders decided to do something to salvage their language and set up the first language nests (called *Te Kohanga Reo* in Maori) in the cities, where Maori children were least exposed to the Maori language. In these language nests, preschoolers and their parents were immersed in Maori by their native speaking elders. All subjects, including math and science, were taught in the Maori language. The language nest program was orally based – listening and speaking were emphasized over reading and writing. In a short time, urban Maori began to reclaim their linguistic roots. When the people in the Maori villages saw the progress being made in the cities, they started language nests in their own communities. Despite not having received any governmental funds for the first five years, the number of language nests grew rapidly.

In conjunction with the language nests, the Maori eventually implemented Maori language programs in local schools. By 1990, there were language nests in over 1,800 schools throughout New Zealand. Over the years, indigenous groups around the world have followed the Maori example and have begun similar projects. Just this year, the first four language nests were started in Oaxaca. They can be found in the Zapoteco community of El Oro, the Mixteco community of Llano de Avispas, the Mazateco community of Huautla de Jimenez, and the Cuicateco community of Coapam de Guerrero.

Language Nests in Oaxaca

On May 2nd and 3rd, I attended a workshop on *nidos de lengua* (Spanish for language nests) at the office of CMPIO. There were over 55 people in attendance, among them indigenous teachers, community volunteers, and the usual host of CMPIO pedagogues. There was one special guest, however - Dr. Alexander Stewart. Dr. Stewart (or Sandy, as he prefers) is a native of New Zealand's Maori tribe

and was one of the principal founders of the *Te Kohanga Reo* now present in New Zealand. After someone from CMPIO welcomed and thanked us all for being at the workshop, the mike was handed over to Sandy. He slowly rose from his chair, conspicuously positioned in the center of the stage. At nearly six and a half feet tall, this man with light skin and clean-cut white hair looked down upon us with imposing seriousness. He brought the microphone to his lips and, with expressed fervor, addressed us all in Maori. For several minutes, he continued speaking this language, but to himself unknown to all present. He never smiled. He spoke as if we were expected to listen, and to listen well. The room was still, beckoned to awed silence at the sight and sound of this strange spectacle. Finally, there was a pause in his stream of incomprehensible words, and Sandy said, “Good morning.”

Power of ‘Lo Nuestro’

The concept of *lo nuestro* (that which is ours) is something indigenous communities across the state of Oaxaca are fighting to define and to embrace as a way of slowing the globalizing and homogenizing effects of neoliberal education. To Sandy, all that we are, all that is *ours*, is wrapped up in one thing – our language. “It is our language that makes us who we are. Only in our own language can we think of ourselves. Without our language, we are no one,” he said. We use our language to articulate and to frame our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us. Any translation of that original perception into another language equates to fundamentally changing that perception. I believe it is with this change in mind that Sandy said, “It is therefore impossible to live as Maori in any other language than our own.” This argument becomes all the more real when the language in question is a denigrated, endangered language. For the indigenous, part of embracing one’s own language is preserving one’s self-identity as a member of a marginalized cultural group. I agreed with Sandy when he said, “A change in language is a change in power.” When the Spanish “conquered” what is today Mexico, they did so with the help language. By forcing indigenous peoples to speak Spanish and, indeed, to be ashamed of their own tongues, they radically weakened indigenous communities. In this sense, the choice of language becomes a question of power. The rejection of Spanish as a dominating

language shifts some degree of power back towards indigenous communities, back towards

comunalidad.

Láa'iny gue'et x:tée zhaybááá'.
 Láa'iny gue'et x:tée gax:lyuh.
 Rse'ehuh nu'uh láa'iny snnyi'ih uh.
 Raa bzilohoh rgwi'ih rih loh raa
 ballguih.
 Nih rni'ih a zaa'lle'eh gù'all uh
 chu'uh atyé'epyu cwáan raa bdahg
 ngá'ah x:tée' tye'eemm.
 Raa gahll rúa'll x:tée gax:lyuh x:tée
 raa btyee'p,
 Gax:lyuh x:teen yuhuh nga`as.
 Nyée'c zhií rgue'eh rse'ehu
 nyée'cpa'ag argue'eh gue'ehcy zhií
 guhny
 Láa'iny gue'et x:tée nnyi'sdóo'
 rbée'eh uh nih ruhny uh.
 Láa'iny gue'et x:tée raa gyu'uhzh
 xníaa rdi'caa'ih
 X:tée raa gyu'uh gyí'u.
 Gyu'uhzh nih be'iny za'c tye'eemm
 nco'ohpy steeby
 pahr ra' wbwaa x:tée'rá banguual
 nih ndann
 que'ity arcastiaraab gahty raab
 te'ybsraab
 láa'iny dáa'ts bí'chi'ih
 Cadya loh bwihzh, bzhiez cwáan
 náa'.
 Zezehny lohnih x:tée raa di'zh.

Profundidad en el cielo.
Profundidad en la tierra.
Significa que tu voz está en tus aguas.
Tu mirada morena aún mira las
estrellas.
Significa que puedes cantar
y chiflar con hojas verdes
del tiempo.
La canción del Llano de las Avispas,
Tilantongo.
Tu voz callada y profanada
por mentes etnocidas
resurge de la profundidad del mar.
Resurge de la profundidad de tus
suelos de tierra roja.
Arenas talladas por el tiempo,
nuevamente humedecidas
por el vaho de la sabiduría de tus
ancianos
ancianos que ansían no morir de
soledad
en el resquicio del vacío.
El sol está saliendo, sonríe.
La fiesta de la palabra está llegando.

Depth of the sky,
Depth of the earth.
It means your voice is in the waters.
Your brown gaze still sweeps the stars.
It means you can sing and whistle with
the green leaves of time
the song of Llano de las Avispas,
Tilantongo.
Your voice hushed and profaned by
ethnocentric minds
Resurges from the depths of the sea.
It spews from the depths of your soil of
red earth,
sands carved by time,
newly moistened by the vapor of
wisdom from your elders,
Elders who long not to die alone
in the sanctuary of the abyss.
The sun is rising, it smiles.
The celebration of words is beginning.

"Llano de las Avispas" originally written in Zapoteco and translated into Spanish by Florentino López Gutiérrez. I have provided the English translation.

One of the reasons for reclaiming indigenous languages is to fortify those languages and their accompanying cultures, but an equally important element is the progress children can make when they learn to conceive of their world using the words of their own culture. According to Sandy, "Our language is the fastest way and the best way for us to learn and to stay in school. Sure we want our language to survive, but the most exciting thing is that our children excel in school with our own language." He boasts that when Maori children are taught in Maori, they are the best students in the

school. This is because they can make connections between what they are learning in the classroom and the realities they live in their own communities.

Sandy could not stress enough the importance of the community-student relationship and its effect on academic performance. He told a brief anecdote about a time when he invited a conservative congressman to visit one of the Maori language nests. After observing the teachers and students there, the congressman's only comment was, "We should build more language nests because they are cheaper than prisons." Although slightly insulted, Sandy could see the politician's rationale. The community bond fostered by the nurturing of a communal language is powerful enough to make kids think twice about leaving school early for a life of crime, as many Maori youth have done in the past two decades. Creating that link is crucial to helping Maori youth grow up to be more viable contributors to both Maori and New Zealand societies alike.

A Nest of Comunalidad

Once a community decides collectively that it wants a *nido de lengua*, it must meticulously plan out how it will be built. Sandy describes the process using a motorcar metaphor:

"Making a *nido de lengua* is like choosing a good motorcar. If you want to go somewhere with your language, only you can choose the vehicle. You want a motorcar that is going to last, that is safe, and that is going to take you where you want to go. The first task is for you to design your own car. Don't rush. Try out several vehicles – some are good, some are bad. Talk to lots of different kinds of people who have different opinions about how one should function. When you have finished choosing, there are some other things you have to do. Prepare yourself to answer why a municipality should support the running of your vehicle. Then you have to be like a good car salesman, just make sure not to lie about the nature of your car. Some people in power are afraid to ride in any vehicle other than their own. You need to invite those people in power to come and ride in your vehicle of language, but be prepared. Do you have a good driver? Will the children be safely secured? When you turn on the radio, will you have music playing that is popular in the community? Do you regularly check the quality of your engine and of all the other parts? Are you driving in the right direction? Are you using the right signals? Are you going too fast or too slow? So when you have chosen your vehicle of language, you invite those in power to go for a ride. Only if you can offer a vehicle of strength, security, and quality will they want to come along for the ride."

Several important points are illuminated by this metaphor. The first is the need to garner community support for the project. In Oaxacan indigenous culture, that means holding assemblies that include all

major leaders within the community and, of course, the community members themselves. Teachers in the community make up an important potential source of support, because they possess valuable educational skills that could facilitate the design and implementation of the *nido de lengua*. After gaining community support, the next step is to make an authentic plan that details exactly how the *nido de lengua* will work. This plan should be a collective vision made by the entire community, not by any small group of individuals. As a community, all must commit to this vision and make it a priority in their daily lives, which means making a conscious decision to using the native language as much as possible. In his presentation, Sandy said, “The language of the home is just as important as the language of the schools.” He later echoed this sentiment in our interview, saying that for the first five years of a child’s life, the real *nido de lengua* happens at home. After those first five years, however, the child still needs to be surrounded by the language and should continue developing it the rest of his or her life. He shared four guiding principles to summarize his advice:

1. You cannot live your life in someone else’s language.
2. If you want to own and keep your language, you have to keep all of it.
3. A life-long commitment to learning is needed.
4. The language of learning will be their language of life.

Challenges in Mexico

The task of trying to revitalize a dying language is nothing easy. It requires much time and commitment from entire communities. One considerable issue is the degree of language loss in some of the communities. Many indigenous pueblos have fewer than 20 living people that still speak their maternal language. One could (and should) reason that this fact simply makes the argument to begin *nidos de lengua* all the more compelling, but when the overwhelming majority of people in the community cannot speak the language, its value as a means of communication decreases. Some question whether it is worth it if no one really uses it anyways. Another problem is the stigma associated with using an indigenous language. I heard many men and women at the workshop say their fellow community members were simply embarrassed to speak the language anymore. Today’s

pressures have made Spanish a more socially acceptable language. The first challenge to overcome, then, is convincing communities that their language is worth saving in the first place.

The potential for reclaiming indigenous languages is certainly real, but communities seeking to create a successful *nido de lengua* must overcome some daunting challenges, including the negative impact of migration and a bureaucratic, centralized educational system. One of the biggest obstacles to preserving an indigenous language is migration. In the past, those migrating from indigenous communities were likely to be fluent in their own language before leaving. As the rate of migration out of the communities increased, the number of native speakers there subsequently decreased. The next generation of indigenous youth grew up surrounded by fewer native speakers, a trend that continued to grow worse with each proceeding generation. Today, when young indigenous migrants leave their communities to find better education or jobs, many possess only a rudimentary understanding of their own language or none at all. They leave behind the only culture that could have further nurtured the development of that language, and, willingly or reluctantly, they adapt to the language of their new surroundings. If and when they return to their home community, they will bring with them a new perspective on what language they believe will serve them best. In an overwhelming majority of cases, that language is anything but their maternal one. As the population of returned migrants grows within the community, a priority once placed on preserving the indigenous language changes due to a perceived need to learn another that will better serve them outside of the community. For this reason, a migrant's return can be just as linguistically harmful as his or her departure.

Spanish and English are the two most prevalent languages of power in Oaxaca. That is to say, they are the two most valued languages in terms of what perceived connection they have with a higher socioeconomic status. Theoretically, learning English can help a Mexican find a better job once they reach the United States, and the same is true of Spanish for a young indigenous boy or girl who dreams of moving to a city one day. Given the perceived power of these two languages, it is interesting that some communities have rejected their own languages not for Spanish or English but for another

indigenous language. One man at the workshop shared with everyone what is happening in his community. “In my community, our language is Zoque. They say that in all the communities, there are only 800 surviving speakers left. Our problem is not only migration but attitude as well. The people in my community would rather speak Zapoteco than Zoque. The languages are very similar, and Zapoteco has more prestige. What can be done?” It would seem, then, that the situation in Oaxaca is much more complex than the one in New Zealand, where language choice is binary. Here, pressures to conform to another language are more multi-dimensional.

Another, perhaps more serious challenge is the current Mexican education system. As explained throughout this paper, the education system as it stands today in Mexico is a bureaucratic monster that neglects the value of *comunalidad*. Because the SEP still maintains such great control over education, including the power to decide what curricula and course materials will be used, it may be difficult for an indigenous community to try to integrate the *nidos de lengua* into schools. One young indigenous woman stood up in the middle of the workshop and asked Sandy in a loud voice, “How did you get the *nidos de lengua* into your schools in New Zealand? Here it would be very difficult.” Sandy, seemingly confident and impassioned, advised those at the workshop to bond together, to go to the director of a school, and to make a collective demand to change what was being taught. As people listened to his suggestion, I saw looks of skepticism jump from one face to another. Some people simply shook their heads, as if to say, *you obviously don’t know how things work in this country*.

The Benefit of Government

“In five to ten years, where will your language be? It’s not the government that should decide that answer,” Sandy said as he addressed the crowd. “If we wait for the government, nothing will happen.” He was right. If a community shares a dream of revitalizing their language, they will have to take the first steps alone. They will have to decide by themselves and plan by themselves, but they have not and will not make it happen by themselves. These communities have had CMPIO guiding them every step of the way. CMPIO brought these communities together at the first *nidos de lengua*

workshop about 6 months ago and have done so two times since. It was CMPIO who brought Sandy all the way to Oaxaca to help guide the process, and it was CMPIO who paid the pedagogues to observe and critique each *nido de lengua*. From where does CMPIO get the resources to do all this? The government. It is true that CMPIO has used some outside grant money to kick-start the project, but all of CMPIO's employees, the very people steering the project, are still under the payroll of the IEEPO, a government institution. And just as CMPIO has been absolutely critical in getting these *nidos de lengua* started, they will be just as needed in integrating them into the schools. The schools in each of these communities fall under CMPIO's jurisdiction as a *jefatura* to the IEEPO. CMPIO will inevitably use this government-derived influence to help pressure school directors and teachers to change. In short, it is CMPIO's double identity as both grassroots and government that makes the *nidos de lengua* feasible.

4. CURSO DE INDUCCIÓN PARA LOS DOCENTES

At eight in the morning, we got out of the truck. The sight of the quaint pueblo was a welcomed relief after a trip that lasted more than eight hours. Upon arriving, a group of five turkeys greeted us with abrupt, synchronized squabbling. The air was cool – I could see the air leave my mouth. We were surrounded by green hills covered by trees and shrubs. Twenty meters from the truck, a woman was washing clothes outside of her thatched hut. I stood watching with no idea what the day had in store.

We had arrived at Arroyo Plátano, a small village situated in the Municipality of San Juan Lalana in northwestern Oaxaca. Three hundred sixty people call it home. I travelled to Arroyo Plátano with Gustavo and Cuauhtémoc García Sandoval, a worker at CMPIO like Gustavo, to observe an indigenous teachers' conference. Gathered at the only school in the pueblo, the *Escuela Primaria Bilingüe Ignacio Zaragoza*, we sat with twenty-one teachers from three other bilingual schools located in Santiago Jocotepec, Cerro Caliente, and El Porvenir. The school, a mere three buildings, employed only four teachers. In a small classroom with somber green walls, the conference began.

Maestro Pablo, the director of the school in Arroyo Plátano, stood up and welcomed us with much care. He briefly explained that this conference would be an opportunity for teachers to share

their own classroom experiences and to communicate new ideas about how to improve teaching methods. Pablo stopped talking and, with a wave of his hand, offered up the floor. One of the teachers from Arroyo Plátano quietly shuffled to the front and began to describe how he runs his first grade class. From his perspective, the objective of bilingual education is “to develop in students the ability to understand and comprehend the significance of words that are based in their community in order for them to then begin reading and writing a second language.” For that reason, he taught his students vocabulary words that are frequently used in Arroyo Plátano – *arroz, frijoles, atole*, etc. As he walked through some of his course plans, I noticed that each one included some mention of corn or one of its derivatives. In fact, the next few teachers who presented seemed to be teaching the exact same thematic material, even though they each taught at different schools and at different grade levels.

During our lunch break, I sat with a teacher named Cecilia, who had been a preschool teacher for eleven years. When I asked her why everybody seemed to be teaching such similar subject matter, she explained, “The schools seem very alike because we are a collective of teachers, and we decide together what we are going to teach.” She said the teachers gather for conferences like this one once or twice each month to design course plans that will fold federally-mandated subject matter into a broader theme based on *comunalidad*. This month it was corn, but in the past they have also incorporated such themes as local animal and plant life, local foods, traditional customs, and the history of the Chinanteco people. In this way, they bring the local knowledge of the community into the formal education of their classrooms. As they work together with a philosophy so deeply rooted in *comunalidad*, they revitalize their own culture without completely rejecting the confines of the federal educational system by which they are employed.

CMPIO has worked hard to train these teachers to care so much about *comunalidad*. As mentioned in chapter 1, the Pedagogical Movement has launched a project to develop community-conscious teachers through a one-year experiential crash course. In the summer of 2006, 52 soon-to-be teachers were selected in many of CMPIO’s 24 school zones to participate in the *Curso de Inducción para*

los Docentes (Induction Course for Teachers). For one month, these young indigenous men and women participated in an intensive training course on how to be effective teachers in bilingual education. They learned how to make a course plan that would not only meet federal curricular requirements but that would also address the subject matter important to their own communities. After the training period, the teachers jumped right into teaching. Half a year later, here were Gustavo and Cuauhtémoc to check on their progress.

It seemed as though they had made many advances. They had found a way to correlate what the state wanted them to teach with what was best for the community, and had done so in accordance with their own customary *asambleas*. They were proud of the conscious sensitivity they had developed in themselves and in their students towards the needs of their own communities. Many complained of a lack of time and resources, but from where I sat in that stuffy room, the quality of their handmade didactic materials was so high that it seemed like they had taken all the time in the world to make them. No, they were not fancy PowerPoint presentations or even glossy textbooks, but every piece of construction paper and every line of Crayola marker that made up their thread-bound books exuded the values of their community.

These teachers are the frontline in a battle against government-imposed education, but the very weapons they use against it (community-based course materials) were paid for by the enemy. I applaud them for making their own textbooks, but if they plan to publish them to make them more accessible to other Chinanteco communities (as they hope to do), they will have to get government funding first. Yet again, the government has played a role in teachers' abilities to reclaim *comunalidad*. CMPIO has enjoyed a very close relationship with these teachers and schools purely through its connection to the IEEPO, because these schools are all part of CMPIO's *jefatura* jurisdiction. The very building we met in was paid for by the IEEPO. The IEEPO's funding made it possible for these young men and women to be teachers in the first place. The IEEPO even paid for the very gas and truck that brought us to Arroyo

Plátano. I do not want to discount all the time and effort these teachers have contributed to improving the education of their students, but they are working from a platform provided by the government.

5. CONCLUSION

For most indigenous communities throughout the state of Oaxaca, the institution of education has represented a repressive, homogenizing force for centuries. Ideally, indigenous Oaxacans could just throw away this institutionalized education and construct a new education system based on their own needs. This new indigenous school system would be fully grounded in *comunalidad*. That is to say, the unique culture of each community would serve as the foundation for all aspects of their education. The daily activities of each school would reflect those of the community – *tequio*, *fiestas*, and collaborative decision-making. Instruction would be given in the language native to those who live there. If new technology were introduced into the classrooms, it would be used constructively to fortify students' understanding of their own cultural realities. Above all, teachers, parents, and students would collectively reflect on their system of education and regularly look for ways to make it better. The quality of a student's education would be judged not by test scores but by how well that student is able to live in and contribute to the community after finishing school. The development of useful skills and a firm understanding of one's own community would be the mark of success, not a diploma. All of these reforms would be made possible if only communities would completely and totally reject the current education system and create their own. But they can't.

In rural indigenous communities without roads, without running water, indeed, without any well-built infrastructure, a lack of financial resources stands as *the* insurmountable obstacle. It is lamentable that it all comes down to money, but even opposition groups like the Zapatistas have relied on international financial support to keep their resistance afloat. There is no chance for small indigenous communities in the marginalized regions of Oaxaca to garner that kind of international attention. In order for well-equipped schools to ever be a reality for Oaxacan indigenous children, these communities would need an amount of funds that they just do not have. In my mind, the possibilities of

community-led education are most strongly constrained by the check teachers and school directors receive every 15 days by the IEEPO. Without that money, however, most indigenous communities would not be able to support any kind of formal education.

Again, a complete rejection of a state-imposed education system should be considered the ultimate step towards reclaiming *comunalidad*, but that is not a step most Oaxacan indigenous communities are prepared to take at this time. Therefore, the next best alternative is to find a way to remain within the federal education system, but without stripping education of its communal roots. That is what CMPIO can offer. Although CMPIO does not aim to create a new education system altogether, it tries to use the old system in a more productive way. In other words, instead of imposing education on a community, CMPIO works to impose a community on education. It does this through its various projects, including the *nidos de lengua* and the *curso de inducción para los docentes*. These projects would not exist, however, without the financial backing of the State. Because CMPIO receives nearly all its funding from the government, it is its very intimacy with the system that makes its fight to change it even possible.

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As a small token of my appreciation for all that CMPIO taught me, not only about public education but about myself, I have designed a simple online blog that should help share with the world their unique and inspirational vision. The blog can be found at www.CMPIO.blogspot.com.

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Interviews:**Formal:**

Eleanor García Sanchez, May 2, 2008, at CMPIO's office
Gustavo Manzano Sosa, April 19, 2008, at CMPIO's office
Dr. Lois Meyer, May 4, 2008, 7:30pm, at her home

Informal:

Dr. Alexander Stewart. May 2, 2008, at CMPIO's office.
Dr. Benjamín Maldonado, April 14, 2008, in the truck on the way to downtown Oaxaca
Maestra Cecilia, April 17, 2008, at the school in Arroyo Plátano
Maestro Fernando Soberanes, May 3, 2008, in his car
Cauhtémoc García Sandoval, April 16, 2008, in the truck on the way to Arroyo Plátano

