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La Otra Camina Educativa: Being a Change to Teach a Change at SIIDENOFAL/CIDECI in San Cristóbal, Chiapas

Kailee Brickner-McDonald
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*El Otro Camino Educativa: Being a Change to Teach a Change at
SIIDENOFAL/CIDECI in San Cristóbal, Chiapas*



By Kailee Brickner-McDonald

School of International Training: Grassroots Development and Social Change

Oaxaca, Mexico Spring 2006

Project Director: Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza

Project Advisor: William Stone

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¹ "You are in your home"

² "What can I do?"

³ "Everything for everybody"

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First I owe thanks to CIDECI Las Casas for warmly welcoming me and teaching me as a student and person. Specifically, I appreciate Dr. Raymundo for guiding me in an experience of informal education, for his flexibility, and for inspiring me in how tirelessly, capably, and humbly he and all of staff of CIDECI live to make the hopes for another world possible. I would like to thank all of the students and teachers at CIDECI who made sure I felt at home, shared their lives with me, patiently answered my questions, took care of me when I was sick, and taught me what they knew.

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Introduction

Eighteen years of my short life have included attending school, and it would be difficult for me to define myself and my interests without involving some sort of illusion to the world of formal learning or my primary occupation of being a traditional student. I was born with a teacher as my mother and since then I have lived in a town with one of the best school systems in New Jersey, chosen to take several classes on topics related to education at The College of William and Mary, and planned to work in a field of education in my future. This being the case, my visit to SIIDENOFAL/CIDECI⁴ on the SIT program's trip to San Cristóbal, Chiapas served to rekindle my fascination with the questions surrounding education that my life as a student has brought me to ask.

More specifically, my visit sparked questions of how our systems of education create and impact the world in which we live. Differential power dynamics, systemic economic inequalities, and cultural hegemony, all very relevant topics to the current world situation, are all directly connected with how and why education works...or fails. Learning about the poor quality, community-corrupting influence of the nationalistic education that has affected most of the impoverished population of Mexico in the Academic Seminar and Media Project of the SIT Oaxaca program, I had begun to wonder what would improve the situation. Rejecting schools altogether? Starting different schools? How? CIDECI's alternative system of education piqued my interest in understanding a functioning, non-governmental institution that focuses on indigenous

⁴ In Spanish: "Sistema Indígena Intercultural de Educación No-Formal /Centro Indígena de Capacitación Integral" or in English: "Indigenous Intercultural System of Informal Education/ Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Comprehensive Indigenous Training Center."

students and useful, skill-based learning. It led me to want to explore these questions in my research.

In this paper I will examine how SIIDENOFAL, and specifically CIDECI Las Casas, is an example of resistance to the current educational and world systems, not only due to its visible alternative curriculum, but in its practical form as well. First, I will provide a theoretical backdrop for my questions, discussing how educational theories and Mexico's national system of education, historically and today, have created a need for alternatives like CIDECI. Then, to show how the goals of CIDECI are just one of its many ways of creating a viable *otro mundo*⁵, I will explain its internal structure, stated goals, and decades of growth. Following this I will reflect on how its administrative workings, classroom environments, and community life all work to socialize and prepare its students for an alternative world, using my experiences as a student and my interactions with CIDECI's students and teachers as support for my interpretations. In my conclusion I will shed light on CIDECI's hopes, successes, and challenges in our changing world.

Methodology

To understand better the life and work of SIIDENOFAL I became a student at CIDECI Las Casas in San Cristóbal, Chiapas for 12 days. I was a participant observer while enrolled as a student, attending my courses in the *talleres*⁶ of baking, agriculture, sewing, and cloth weaving, eating in the cafeteria for each meal, sleeping in the dormitories, doing the cooperative work on the weekend, attending the prayer services each evening, and having Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza, the General Director of

⁵ Spanish for 'another world,' a phrase commonly used in the Zapatista movement: "Un otro mundo es posible" (Another World is Possible)

⁶ Spanish for 'workshops' or 'course'

SIIDENOFAL, as my Project Director. My role as a participant observer gave me access to people I could interview. I shared formal interviews with three teachers, two of whom also have administrative roles. Five students gave me their thoughts in formal interviews, too. One had graduated and started a typing *taller* in her community with CIDECI's support, three were departing from their time at CIDECI to immediately start projects in their communities, and one is a current student in the middle of her time at CIDECI. Additionally, I also had several informative discussions with Dr. Raymundo.

Being part of CIDECI's everyday life gave me opportunities to also informally interview my fellow students at meals, in classes, while wandering around the grounds, getting ready for bed, and waiting for rides, meals, and meetings. My stay at CIDECI Las Casas coincidentally also made it possible for me to attend the *taller* on *La Otra Compañía*⁷ each Thursday, hosted by the *Centro de Estudios, Informacion y Documentacion: Immanuel Wallerstein*⁸, and the forum for women of *La Otra Compañía*, one of the many conferences hosted by CIDECI.

I believe that these were effective field methods because they allowed me to see many sides of SIIDENOFAL. I had only planned on studying the component of CIDECI and one of its outreach impacts (micro projects), but living there opened up the Wallerstein Center's events, the forums it hosted, and the many other facets of SIIDENOFAL. Experiencing Dr. Raymundo as my advisor impressed me with SIIDENOFAL's value of self-guided learning in action. From my self-evaluation to having full control over the direction of my project and how I would use it to learn, I gained a greater appreciation and understanding of how this component is applied. Not

⁷ Spanish for "The Other Campaign," the tour of Mexico by the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos, or Delgado Zero, and EZLN entourage which started at CIDECI

⁸ Spanish for "The Center of Studies, Information, and Documentation: Immanuel Wallerstein"

only did I participate and observe in the classroom, but I got a fuller understanding of CIDECI's more subtle curriculum. I was able to experience firsthand how SIIDENOFAL's inspirations, beliefs, hopes, and goals are enacted in all of the aspects of its educational process.

While I found these methods very useful, they also led to challenges in my field work. In contact with the students on a daily level, I naturally had more interaction with female students than male, as the social scene at CIDECI is often informally separated by gender. Only towards the end of my time there was I able to talk to and get the perspectives of male students. Also, many students were more comfortable speaking in their native, non-Spanish languages, which I could not understand. While the students were generally very welcoming, the language difference made me very aware of my status as an outsider, and I missed the meaning of many conversations. During interviews with several of the students, both informal and formal, there were misunderstandings which made certain questions impossible for me to ask clearly or my informants to answer fully. The amount of time I spent focusing specifically on CIDECI Las Casas, while valuable, limited my ability to deeply explore the other aspects of SIIDENOFAL. Therefore I will primarily be looking at CIDECI Las Casas, although it is impossible to separate it from the system of which it is a part. These weaknesses aside, my combination of selected field methods enabled me to learn more than I had hoped or planned.

Knowledge is Power?

"I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind, got my paper and I was free." – Closer to Fine, Indigo Girls

One would think I would be done with this formal school thing by now. Why am I investing so much of myself and my money in a university degree? Granted that I am literate, I could pick up a book or talk to people with more life experiences, and, with less pressure and for free, acquire the same knowledge. To have a respected establishment guide this learning and give me a piece of paper that says that I did it, though, it is a very, if not the most important, part of my education to the institutions, employers, and people in my society. It is a testimony to the fact that I struggled through physics classes and labored over the classics, but it says much more than that. Schools in the Western and capitalist model, those of which I have attended in the United States and those which the Mexican government provides to its youth as well, teach a layered curriculum that reaches beyond what is taught in the classroom to prepare its students for a certain place in their world's dominant system.

An educational degree represents more than a set of knowledge acquired in classes, due to schools' roles as social and economic institutions. The dominant educational system offers preparation for life in a differential and capitalistic society. It does this in several ways, one of which is limiting access to high quality and advanced education. Sociologists Portes and Wilson use their path model to show that socioeconomic status has a significant impact on the educational attainment of students.⁹ Students from wealthy families, regardless of their IQ, are privileged to achieving higher levels of education, and therefore higher paying and better jobs. By being exclusive in their access, traditional schools withhold a key to socioeconomic advancement,

⁹ Kenneth Wilson and Alejandro Portes, "The Educational Attainment Process: Results from a National Sample," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 81, No. 2, (Sept. 1975), 343-363.

safeguarding a hierarchical society and locking out the majority from improving their economic position.

In addition to screening its students for their socioeconomic class and giving preference to the more privileged, Western schools also prepare their students to function in the capitalist economy and society with their institutional structure. Giving grades and encouraging competitive learning in schools and classrooms trains students to think of our hierarchically ranked society as a meritocratic and natural.¹⁰ Also, it accustoms students to a life of formal schedules and individual rewards, preparing students for sitting at a desk for hours at a time and an independent life, things most lives the dominant economy and society require. While formal classrooms impart these skills that can be useful for students who are going to live and function in that model, they do not serve the students who have no future in such a system.¹¹

Starting at the time of the revolution in 1920s and throughout the democratization and neoliberalization of Mexico, education has become a priority of the state, not just in controlling the access to it but also in its content and form. In terms of access, the Mexican constitution of 1917, still in place today, calls for compulsory and free elementary education. This is not a reality. Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico and the one with the largest indigenous population, lags behind all other Mexican states in terms of school attendance, accessibility, and achievement ratings. Dan LaBotz quotes Subcomandante Marcos, speaker for the Zapatista movement, reporting on the conditions of Chiapas in 1994: “In primary school, 72 of every 100 children do not finish first

¹⁰ Randall Collins, “Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 36, No. 6, (December 1971), 1002-1019.

¹¹ Aaron Benavot and Phyllis Riddle, “The Expansion of Primary Education, 1870-1940: Trends and Issues,” *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 61, No. 3, (July 1988), 191-201.

grade. More than half the schools offer only up to the third grade, and half the schools have only one teacher...’ Many children get no education because their parents need them to work in the fields or to work at home so another adult in the family can work in the fields.”¹² Of those who have any access to primary education nationally, “[r]oughly 10% ...never complete middle school, either because their parents can't afford to send them, they drop out to take jobs, or there is simply no place for them.”¹³ When I asked students at CIDECI about their previous educational experience, only two of them had attended school beyond primary education. Education, useful in getting a job in Mexico and the world economy, is clearly not available to all. However, this type of exclusive education is not necessarily useful in indigenous communities that do not seek or have a place on the world economy.

In such cases, the knowledge and socialization taught by this national, formal, and traditional education offers little. In the Mexican constitution, the desire for greater access to education was not necessarily to improve life at a community level for the majority, but rather at a national level for the minority. Article three of the Mexican constitution calls for a national education to “develop harmoniously all the faculties of the human being and...foster in him at the same time a love of country and a consciousness of international solidarity, in independence and justice.” In section I article C it explains that it “shall be national insofar as...it shall achieve...the continuity and growth of our culture.” In section III the constitution details how private educational

¹² Dan LaBotz, *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform*, (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 22.

¹³ Chris Kraul, “Mexico's Schools Can't Keep Up; A dire lack of facilities sometimes means that impoverished parents end up building them,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 21, 2004), 1.

institutions “must also be in harmony with official plans and programs.” Education, therefore, has been seen as a way to nationalize a pluricultural society. In the experiences of the students I spoke with at CIDECI, the majority said that their time in a primary school taught them how to read and write, in Spanish. Using and teaching primarily the Spanish language, holding formal enrollment cycles that exclude those who need to contribute to the work in their families and communities, and generally supporting a centralized, often race-biased curriculum has alienated most indigenous communities from educational benefits. Education has historically become “...a tool to reinforce social differentiation and support the distorted form of capitalist development which presently characterizes Mexico.”¹⁴ Monopolizing education into their dominant form, Mexican schools are not advantageously socializing their indigenous students, excluded by class, race, or desire from the benefits of capitalism, for life within their own cultures and communities.

Like the poster in elementary schools across the United States declares, Knowledge is Power. But this is not a positive thing if the education socializes its students for an alien society, or used as a tool of exclusion and repression. Education in a model respectful of and reflexive to a culture, though, can be strongly beneficial. The power of schools to transform its students and prepare them for their world, in both the classes they provide and the form in which they function, gives schools the amazing potential to teach positive things, too. They can instruct students how to be informed and constructively critical about the world, teach such assets to communicating ideas as reading and writing, and can be a way to share useful skills for improving community life

¹⁴ David Barkin, “Review: Educacion y radicalismo en Mexico. Vol I: Los anos de Bassols, 1931-1934. by John A. Britton and Educacion y radicalismo en Mexico. Vol. II: Los anos de Cardenas, 1934-1940 by John A. Britton,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1. (Feb., 1979), pp. 156-157.

as well. How should we change the traditional educational system so that it can really serve the needs of its students, teaching them beneficial knowledge for improving their lives and socializing them to thrive in their own, different economic and social worlds?

SIIDENOFAL/CIDECI's Answer: Goals and Growth

“We have to expropriate those who monopolize the prestige of knowledge and expression.” - Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza, in an interview with In Motion magazine¹⁵

Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza, General Coordinator of SIIDENOFAL, has asked the same question. After an extensive education in the traditional system, he was on a track of working in public administration for the Mexican government's schools. Administering their centers of education he realized that the government's goals of development and progress could not provide the kind of growth that actually helped its indigenous people. Realizing that “the government did not believe in anything” turned Dr. Raymundo's world “upside down.” In turn, he started turning the definition of education on its head as well. In 1988 he began building three centers of education to help the indigenous communities of Chiapas continue to live in resistance, giving a “microscopic contribution” to their survival.¹⁶ Working with the people already walking the path of opposition to the dominant culture, society, and economy, together they looked at the historical work of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, the Jesuits, and others who

¹⁵ “Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza: A University Without Shoes,” *In Motion Magazine*, (April 8, 2006), <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/gest_int_1.html>.

¹⁶ Interview by author with Dr. Raymundo, 2 May 2006.

worked in Latin America to denounce injustice and work from below, *sin zapatas*,¹⁷ to construct a better life for indigenous communities. Critical of the world system, rejecting the dominant definitions of poverty, nation, development, and knowledge, CIDECI has followed a difficult path in many directions with these driving inspirations. Self-defined as an informal system of useful education and training to help the process of resistance to the status quo, CIDECI has many goals. They aid in the construction of autonomous and dynamic cultural regeneration for intercultural populations to help their students to have lives of personal dignity, liberty, self-sufficiency, shared communal existence, self management, autonomy, gratitude and reciprocity, and spirituality. More generally, they hope their students will “learn to do, learn to learn, and learn to be more” so that they can build self sufficient, self appreciating, and self managing communities.¹⁸ Building nine centers across Chiapas since 1989, all but CIDECI Las Casas has been turned over to communities or other organizations for self-management. Between the 1994 Zapatista rebellion and Mexico’s financial implosion in 1998, the funding and functioning capabilities of CIDECI and its many counterparts have been rocked, yet the times of conflict and crisis only make its mission more needed. Today CIDECI Las Casas, starting at its present location just last May, is only one part, albeit an important one, of the new SIIDENOFAL network of like-minded, growing, and resisting educational alternatives. These now include *Universidad de la Tierra-Chiapas*, *Centro de Estudios sobre*

¹⁷ “Without Shoes” is a phrase used by Dr. Raymundo to describe the type of university CIDECI is in *In Motion* magazine.

¹⁸ Or, in Spanish, they hope that they will “aprender a hacer, aprender a aprender, y aprender a ser más.” From “Description General del SIIDENOFAL(or General Description of SIIDENOFAL),” 1-4.

*Interculturalidad, Centro de Estudios, Informacion y Documentacion: Immanuel Wallerstein, and Centro Universitario de Educacion Abierta y a Distancia.*¹⁹

Trying to fit SIIDENOFAL into a categorical definition limits its vision and organic flexibility. As Immanuel Wallerstein, social scientist, author of the world-systems analysis, and supporter of CIDECI, says, “How is it possible to continue to have a position of resistance, while one is busy fitting into an established theory?”²⁰ SIIDENOFAL’s components are approaching education differently and are deliberately bringing it back to a human scale of informal, flexible growth, as needed to fulfill its purpose on the ground for the people with whom it works and serves. The experiences, history, and beliefs that each teacher and student brings to CIDECI and its partners have made them more than just schools or projects: “It is another thing. We are different. We do not work alone. We are more like a family. Our path is a path of conscience. It is to champion each student so they can better live their everyday lives, to know each student and her community and her daily growth. This is the soul of our system.”²¹

Seeing that education is a valuable asset and a powerful tool in the world, SIIDENOFAL wants to make it beneficial and accessible, and give it a different definition for those it has dominated. CIDECI takes the power of knowledge out of the hands of those who monopolize and define its worth, excluding the majority. Its

¹⁹ Spanish for “University of the Land- Chiapas, Center for Intercultural Studies, Center of Studies, Information, and Documentation: Immanuel Wallerstein, and University Center of Open and Distance Learning.”

²⁰ “Cómo es posible seguir teniendo una posición de resistencia, cuando uno se está convirtiendo en una teoría establecida?” -Immanuel Wallerstein in *The Itinerary of World-Systems Analysis, or How to Resist becoming a Theory*, 2002, in the preface to *La Crisis Estructural de Capitalismo* by Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas.

²¹ Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza in interview with Kailee Brickner-McDonald, May 2, 2006.

administrators, teachers, and students treat their life work as their part in the *lucha*²² for the repressed and ignored to make another world, which includes all, possible.

“Estás en tu casa”: Administrative Workings

*“Bureaucracy is the death of all sound work.” – Albert Einstein*²³

I got in a taxi drove fifteen minutes out from the center of San Cristóbal, to the farthest outskirts of the colonial city where the most recently built *colonias*²⁴ meet the wooded mountains which enclose the valley. I saw the terraced gardens and knew I had made it. The front buildings by the gate are fresh brick with brightly colored windows and doors, in color schemes according to the function of the building. With my backpack for my stay, I walked to meet with Dr. Raymundo a second time, this time unexpected. After ten minutes, he welcomed me into his office and introduced me to Freddie, a student who helps new students get settled and answers questions. Freddie walked me around the center and showed me my dormitory, a log cabin, and the different workshops available. After a brief tour we went to *Maestro*²⁵ Rafael’s office and I was asked what courses I would like to take. He wrote out my three requests on a slip of paper, recommending that I could return to decide my fourth class when I had a better idea of what I would like to learn, or not take a fourth at all and reserve personal time. I asked, “Are there some classes that are more conducive for guests?” No, whatever I wished to take would be best. Besides participating in the Saturday morning communal work

²² Spanish for ‘battle’ or ‘fight’ or ‘struggle’, used in Zapatista discourse.

²³ <<http://chatna.com/theme/bureaucracy.htm>>.

²⁴ Spanish for ‘neighborhoods,’ municipal units in Mexican cities.

²⁵ Spanish for ‘teacher.’

producing food for the center, could I pay for my time there? “No, estás en tu casa.”²⁶ So, without other formalities, I became a student at CIDECI.

The Western and nationalized Mexican idea of administration and service apply the capitalistic economic model to everyday life, which turns people into customers and units of consumption and production instead of multidimensional, valuable parts of their community in more than an economic sense.²⁷ Fitting the idea of ‘service’ into this framework leads to the bureaucratic networks that now are almost unavoidable in governmental or educational public life. This kind of ‘service’ takes the faces out of even the most basic interactions, and also takes the funding out of other more human sectors. Ninety-three percent of all the money nationally allocated for Mexican education is budgeted for administrative and bureaucratic costs, and that does not improve Mexico’s second to last rank in the educational ratings of OPEC nations.²⁸

At CIDECI the priorities are different. In the administration of CIDECI students are handled as people, with flexibility according to their unique situation and needs. The way the SIIDENOFAL system has been created and is being ‘organically grown’ also rejects the conformation to the modernization, commodification, and institutionalization of service. In my experience at CIDECI, beyond just enrolling, I was impressed by the flexibility, humanity, and hospitality with which I, as one of the 854 annual students of CIDECI, was received. I could not help but to compare that to the faceless, tedious, and exclusive admissions, financial, housing, and registration processes at my home college,

²⁶ Spanish for “You are in your house,” as spoken to me by Maestro Rafael.

²⁷ Gustavo Esteva lecture to SIT students, March 2006

²⁸ Diego Cevallos, “Despite Heavy Funding, Mexico’s Schools Get Low Marks,” *Los Angeles Times* (Oct. 7, 2004), <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/>>.

realizing how similar that is to my government's process as well, such as in applying for a drivers license, or the Mexican's government's process, as I experienced when I painfully attempted to renew my visa in the middle of my time in San Cristóbal. Costly in time, money, and frustration for the sake of "modern efficiency," that idea and practice is one which SIIDENOFAL's educational goals and administrative workings resist.

Not only does CIDECI resist this marketization of life in the types of skills it teaches, but in its own actions as well. How differently CIDECI was most concerned with how to make each of their students' stays there possible and beneficial for them, even though it has hundreds of students a year presenting similar challenges!²⁹ The time I wished to stay, how many and which classes I desired to take, and if I changed my mind about any of that, it was all in my hands, as it was in the hands of all the students they truly serve. In speaking with students Felizana, Cristoforo, and Juana, their experiences were similar. They found out about CIDECI by word of mouth in their communities, and arrived to be welcomed, all expenses paid, their enrollment time and courses ready for their election. For another example, another student, Patrona, has a baby about one year old. Patrona is enrolled in four courses a day, and her child can join her in all of her activities. Freddie also told me about how it is encouraged for him and the other students to go home for months at a time to help their families and communities harvest the corn, beans, coffee, or other crops that they grow communally for their livelihoods. These are only a few examples of how accommodating CIDECI is in allowing its members of its community to join as they can, giving customized support as needs arise. Putting their

²⁹ SIIDENOFAL's Informe General de Actividades, or General Report on Activities, 2005 records 224 women and 630 men attending CIDECI from over 49 municipalities of Chiapas.

rejection of the “modernized” world into action, they provide a world hospitable to the world their students live in and strive to perpetuate.

One of the goals of CIDECI is to prepare students to survive better in their home communities, and the way CIDECI treats its students at the administrative level reflects this goal in a very concrete way. It makes CIDECI as welcoming and accessible as entering into ones’ own house. It was a similar feeling to that which I experienced when I joined CAPISE³⁰, unexpectedly, in a visit to Zinacantán, a Zapatista indigenous community an hour outside of San Cristóbal celebrating their Santa Cruz water festival. I was brought in, given *atole*³¹ to drink, given a seat, and welcomed to stay the night as their guest and member of their families until I was ready to leave. In contrast to the modern ideas of bureaucratic process and managing units of customers instead of people, CIDECI’s humanizing approach reinforces and echoes that of the alternative society and world already functioning.

Another way in which CIDECI’s administrative workings criticize the dominant world system is in its rejection of traditional planning in the lives of its students and in its life as an educational system. This practice is appropriate for CIDECI’s goals, considering how Arturo Escobar describes planning’s impact as that which “...redefines social and economic life in accordance with the criteria of rationality, efficiency, and morality which are consonant with the history and needs of capitalist, industrial society,

³⁰ CAPISE is a human rights’ watch NGO based in San Cristóbal who was working with two other SIT students, and invited me to join them to pick up a peace delegate, my friend Amanda LaBelle, in Zinacantán.

³¹ A regional hot drink made from corn and sugar, drunk on special occasions.

but not those of the Third World.”³² CIDECI does not require its students to plan their time of entry and exit from the school, nor does it require them to have specific goals for coming or for after they leave. The majority of students I spoke with at CIDECI were not sure of their lives post-CIDECI. By not forcing the issue, CIDECI’s administration embodies their belief that society and life can not be “engineered and directed, produced at will,” a modern construction that came with the increase in the professionalization of state and society, injustice, economics, and outsiders’ intervention that turns diverse people into dominated subjects.³³

In terms of its own development as a system of education, CIDECI has become what it is not though creating its system and then strictly following that plan. In their community work they are continuously evaluating the changing situations, doing and then reflecting on their actions, having models and fundamental principles to follow but not a fixed guide to their future.³⁴ This form of direction allows growth to be more need-based and coming from below, rather than enforced from an abstract vertical plan. This follows a process of decision making and viewing the future similar to the process of growth of the communities it supports.³⁵ In these administrative forms, CIDECI goes beyond the classroom to embody its mission of preparing students for a world beyond the “developed” model of a national, institutionalized, and modern life in the capitalist market.

³² Arturo Escobar, “Planning” in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (New York: Witwatersrand University Press and Zed Books Ltd.: 1992), 135.

³³ Arturo Escobar, “Planning” in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (New York: Witwatersrand University Press and Zed Books Ltd.: 1992), 133.

³⁴ *El Centro Regional de Educacion no-formal “Fray Bartolome de Las Casas” como medio de investigacion-accion comunitaria* chart.

³⁵ Gustavo Esteva lecture to SIT students, March 2006.

¿Qué Puedo Hacer?: Classroom Environment

“We too [at SIIDENOFAL] are a university which has knowledge. We can draw up study plans in order to accredit this kind of profession, which will still keep them close to the earth, in the service of others, and which will allow them to strengthen their habitat in order to survive, to resist.” –Dr. Raymundo in In Motion

Forget regular bells, uniform desks, multiple choice exams with number two pencils, raising your hand to be involved, and instructors whose main qualification is a government certification to teach. CIDECI has different teachers teaching different things, differently, to meet its goals of a different world.

What CIDECI teaches, their primary curriculum of the courses it offers, are things that will be useful once its students return to their homes in autonomy-seeking, resistant communities with little resources. In my sewing course I realized my fellow students were not practicing stitching on text-book-designed worksheets, memorizing the parts to their sewing machines, or even making stuffed animal ducks, as I had tediously learned to sew in my middle-school Home Economics class. Instead, they were making clothes for their families or for themselves, the very things they would need to do once they would be on their own, actually practicing their new art. CIDECI’s educational goals are met in the fact that they are teaching useful skills for real community life, but the way they are teaching them supplies their lesson in an additional way. Who teaches and how they teach also prepares CIDECI’s students for the community life that CIDECI aims to support.

Similarly to Dr. Raymundo, teacher David Gómez Díaz also had a struggle studying and working in the formal system. When he came to CIDECI as an alternative to completing his degree at a traditional university, he began working in the fields, gaining experiences at three CIDECI centers. Starting in 1998 he took on the responsibility of directing *granga integral*³⁶ and manages the self-supporting farming at CIDECI Las Casas. He explained to me how now he is still a student, learning more every day how to meet needs as they arise and how to teach the many aspects of farming to his students in a way that will be simple to understand and best practiced in their communities. “None of us here are experts in the traditional sense. We all, teachers and students, work hard together to be self sufficient and gain experiences and skills we can share with others when they need them,” he explained to me.³⁷ In rejecting the idea of needing experts and exclusive titles, CIDECI creates a more a horizontal organization, honoring values similar to those which indigenous communities practice with *usos y costumbres*³⁸ and that the Zapatista movement prioritizes.

David was not the only instructor to apply these ideas of de-professionalizing education to his work. Gloria Gómez Sepera has lived in San Cristóbal all her life, attended elementary school, lived with her family, and then spent twelve years working in a bakery. With her experience in a bakery, she now teaches baking. In 2004 she began working at CIDECI due to the flexible schedule it allowed her to have with her new family and the people with whom she would get to interact. No formal culinary school

³⁶ Spanish for ‘integrated farming’

³⁷ That is not a direct quote, as David spoke in Spanish and I preserved his words in abbreviated note form, but it summarizes his answer to my question, “What is your role here at CIDECI?”

³⁸ Spanish for ‘uses and customs,’ a traditional, radically democratic way of communal governing which many indigenous communities use.

needed, and after we made the three to four hundred pieces of basic bread for all of CIDECI to eat at dinner, she could guide us in making a recipe every day. One of her hopes for her future is to learn more about baking...which she thinks she will do as she teaches.³⁹ The type of education that the teachers have received and which qualifies them to competently share their knowledge is the same experience-based type which they give.

CIDECI's classroom environment is based in communal, hands-on experimentation and self-directed learning. I experienced this style of education in all of the courses I attended. While I came into the bakery without even knowing how to best divide the kilo of dough into thirty-six even balls and still was the slowest at it by the time I left, I had taught my fellow students and the teacher how to make pretzel shaped bread. They even kept a sample on the shelf so that when I left they would have a model. The first day the teacher was not even in the classroom, unbeknownst to me, and yet I did not notice a change in the dynamic when she was there every other day. With the flexibility of the classroom environment, I could teach myself how to be useful and helpful, if I desired. I did want to learn, so I watched and asked how to make it, and then realized that I could be creative and bring my experiences to making any shaped bread I wanted. My attempts at flower shapes that burned easily and twisted ropes of dough that were ugly taught me not to make them like that. Watching the boy next to me put too much flour on top of conch-shaped bread, or the woman across the table braid her coil-shaped bread to tightly all taught me how to make better, or avoid, each shape. Simply experiencing the work in a group of people with mixed abilities, all learning from each other, guided my hands and allowed me to experiment until I could do it. My experience

³⁹ Interview with author, April 28, 2006.

as both a teacher and a student in that class has given me the confidence to be able to bake bread independently, teach it to others when I get back to my home community, and appreciate the labor that makes possible the bread I eat. David was right. Not only are no experts needed, but the lack of such professionalized ‘experts’ gives the course a relaxed and communal atmosphere which allows for more creativity, teaching everyone more, and in a style which teaches you that all you need is the desire to learn.

My questions and desires led my learning, better meeting my real needs, more like in real life. This led to more than one frustrating situation for me, someone used to learning in general sweeps of abstract instruction, rarely accompanied by practice or practical details. For example, after an hour of pumping the non-electric sewing machine with both my feet and hands for each stitch, I watched the girl to my left get it to hum into smooth production with one well-placed kick. The way I had been doing it worked, so she had assumed that I desired to do it like that! If I needed to know how to accomplish the task at hand, and would need to know it in the future, I learned to ask or watch or do some combination of the two while actually doing it. This method of teaching gives CIDECI’s students more control. It leads to more need-based, useful learning that is memorable because it was a struggle the first time and was necessary to accomplish the task at hand. It teaches that you can become the “expert” with experiences and self-trials. It is the discovery-based teaching and learning that David uses to meet the CIDECI community’s farm production needs, and how his fellow non-experts in self supporting communities come to meet their needs for survival and resistance.

Put into practice, it is similar to how the Zapatistas in Zinacantán, from which CIDECI had 24 students in 2005, had to respond to their community needs. The Zapatistas of Zinacantán had their water supply cut off by a competing national political party, and have implemented a system of PVC-pipe gutters to better collect rainwater. Knowing how to independently meet the challenges of community life enables resistance with limited resources. CIDECI lives like those communities and teaches its students to learn in a way that prepares them to teach themselves to meet the future, unplanned needs of their communities, all at once. How CIDECI decides to teach its students to learn is a decision which helps them in their communities more than a formal, traditional classroom approach. Students are prepared to thrive independently from ‘experts’ so that they can resist and survive challenges by more than the skills CIDECI’s courses teach alone. CIDECI’s method of teaching and its daily functioning as a community of learners with limited resources provides a bigger, more applicable lesson.

“Todo por todos:” Community Life

“Dignity cannot be studied. You live it or it dies...” – Subcomandante Marcos⁴⁰

In its very visible curriculum, CIDECI prepares students to return to their communities in numerous ways. One direct support it provides is the creation of micro projects. When students return to their families they can choose to bring their skills with them for their personal lives or also in these CIDECI-supported projects. While I was at CIDECI I spoke with four students who were starting *talleres* or cooperative skill centers in their own communities. Typing, sewing, and bakery workshops and a health clinic

⁴⁰ Subcomandante Marcos, Mexico, to Eric Jauffret, France, 20 June, 1995, <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/marcos_index.html>.

were just one week's graduates' hopes for improving the way of life in their home communities. In 2005 alone, CIDECI students returned to their communities to begin 33 micro projects, from starting salons and horticulture projects to carpentry and metallurgy workshops, directly benefiting two cooperatives, eight women's collectives, eight groups of families totaling 51 in all, fourteen communities at large, and two NGOs.⁴¹

Christoforo, a student from Jolitontic, an indigenous community three hours outside of San Cristóbal, is starting a health clinic after eleven months at CIDECI. Not only will it be there to provide health services, but also he plans to teach others how to be healers. CIDECI provided him with the medicines and starting supplies so that this would be possible, and it is the first time a clinic will be available in his community.⁴² Since 1989 CIDECI has implemented 911 such community micro projects.⁴³ With the increase of migration and instability in Chiapas, these steps to internal community productivity and increased opportunities at home are the actualization of CIDECI's hopes. As Dr. Raymundo expressed, "The best part of life here is hearing our students come back to their home at CIDECI being able to say, 'Look at my life. Look how I am helping my community. Thank you.'"

CIDECI also works directly in the community of San Cristóbal. They are accessible to their neighbors, allowing women from the adjacent *colonias* to collect firewood in CIDECI's woods, building water tanks for their use, and distributing

⁴¹ SIIDENOFAL's *Informe General de Actividades 2005* (or *General Review of Activities, 2005*), p. 7-8.

⁴² My interview with Christoforo Gomez Perez, before he departed for Jolitontic with his 15 boxes of medical supplies on April 27, 2006.

⁴³ *Curriculum Del CIDECI 1989-2005* (or *CIDECI's Curriculum*), 2.

emergency help to struggling indigenous families who migrate to the city.⁴⁴ Free medical services at CIDECI's health clinic have aided 1,500 people in 2005, and more than 900 people from indigenous communities have accepted CIDECI's offer of free food and lodging while making their necessary visits to the city.⁴⁵ Also, CIDECI hosts conferences for diverse groups, from Baptists to groups meeting to discuss Mayan spirituality. *La Otra Compañía* also began there and continues to find open doors at CIDECI for its forums and workshops, which CIDECI makes accessible for its students. Very directly, CIDECI provides support for the indigenous community's struggle for survival throughout Chiapas, teaching a model of hospitality implicit in the *otro mundo* to its students at the same time.

In its less evident curriculum, CIDECI prepares students for community life more generally. Living at CIDECI involves a balance of rights, obligations and cooperation that is similar to the lifestyle in the indigenous communities CIDECI seeks to support. I got to take part in this, as a student. My agriculture teacher was Manuel Pérez Gómez, from San Juan Chamula, a community close to San Cristóbal. Manuel is one of the workers who tills in the terraced fields at the base of the mountain on which CIDECI rests, growing the food for the center each day from 9 in the morning until 3 each afternoon. David introduced us on my first day of "agriculture class" as someone here to learn and work. David let Manuel take it from there. Manuel stopped breaking apart the earth into a new terrace and showed me how the terrace below was growing lettuce, radishes, and that the radishes needed more compost, which came from the rabbits above. He explained how they use everything, creating no garbage and producing everything for

⁴⁴ The material emergency help has been given to 150 families in the past year. *Informe General 2005*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Informe General 2005*, 11-12.

internal use at the center. He brought me to the compost pile, and after a few exemplary digs he handed me the shovel and went back to leveling the terrace above. That first day I got to break apart the pile of compost, and then join another worker pave a path from the extra rocks of the terrace walls, and finally join Manuel in leveling the upper terrace, all activities in which Manuel had total faith in my abilities to accomplish, and all activities that made a microscopic contribution to CIDECI's self-supporting lifecycle.

Each Saturday morning all of the students participate in similar agricultural production for the sake of the center. Juana and Francesca, sisters returning to their communities to start CIDECI projects, commented on how similarly the work in the fields at CIDECI corresponds to the system of *cargoes*, or community responsibilities, that function in their home communities. The responsibility of communally working gives all of the members of their families the rights to the communal land and a voice in their communities. This corresponding system of rights derived from meeting communal obligations contributes to CIDECI's own self sufficiency, and also creates a community similar to those which their students are accustomed and will be returning. I did not hear a single complaint, expression of resistance, or disparaging comment towards the CIDECI lifestyle during my time there, and what I did not hear matched what I did hear—a respectful, personal connection to the people, resources, and mission of their community. In terms of socializing its students, CIDECI's form of life teaches its function of building in its students a greater appreciation for a richly shared life in an interdependent community.

Separate from the job specialization of other institutions and modern economic models, CIDECI models itself after indigenous communities and exemplifies an alternative world outside the market, independent and unified. When referring to Maestro Rafael's job in my interview with him, he quickly corrected my use of 'job.' He did not just work there: "No, here we are in our home, living out our convictions." Dr. Raymundo, David, and the students I spoke with expressed similar feelings of dedication to the CIDECI community. Later that week Cristoforo, the student returning to his community the next day to start a *casa de salud*,⁴⁶ told me his sister first told him about CIDECI. Maestro Rafael, passing by, clarified that what he meant by sister was a woman in his community, unrelated except that she shared his community. I could understand his broad use of 'sister' after my experience at CIDECI for only 12 days, as I saw the familial interdependence required for their community's lifestyle, a manifestation of CIDECI's goal of supporting indigenous communities.

Eating together with the students of CIDECI the lettuce and radishes that had filled the fields I had just replanted with more of the same, I felt connected not just to my food but to the space, community, and system of cooperative living. By my small work in the fields, I understood the integration of all aspects of life that CIDECI accomplishes by their cooperative community. I find that this communal generation of resources is useful as a metaphor for life at CIDECI in a broader sense. The education they provide feeds a cycling path of community flourishing worth fighting for. The roots of their system are formed by the traditions of the communities they wish to regenerate, and the fruits of their labor return to their source to perpetuate a way of life that originally provided

⁴⁶ A "house of health," or a health clinic.

CIDECI with the rich sustenance to exist and grow. They use all areas of their organization to teach their lessons, and no opportunity is lost.

Conclusion: That Which is Possible and Desirable

“[We are] preparing not for a revolutionary war, but a transitional peace.”-

*Gustavo Esteva*⁴⁷

Applied around the world, education has become important in ‘getting ahead’ and as a measure of a nation’s development. But what is that definition of progress to the marginalized people fighting for a world of their own? Mexico has applied the Western model of education, preparing its students for their social and economic places in the dominant world system. Reacting to such use of education as a dominator, Arturo Escobar calls for “[t]he Western rationality...to open up to the plurality of forms of knowledge and conceptions of change that exist in the world and recognize that objective, detaching, and scientific knowledge is just one possible form among many.”⁴⁸ CIDECI has created an alternative that challenges the arbitrary application of a formal, exclusive, and academic educational curriculum in communities which it fails to serve.

CIDECI provides another educational path to meet its goals of making another world possible. Using its position as a socializing institution in addition to its role as a skill-sharing center, it sets itself apart from traditional, formal education in its purpose

⁴⁷ Gustavo Esteva, “The Meaning and Scope of the Struggle for Autonomy,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 117, Vol. 28, No. 2. (March, 2001), 138.

⁴⁸ Arturo Escobar, 143.

and practices at every level of its system of study. In terms of its alternative purpose, Maestro David expressed CIDECI's goals in the following manner:

“I hope to prepare the people who live in poverty to fight against the bad government, neoliberalism and capitalism that is marginalizing them, the majority. Those who come from poor conditions don't need to have anything to come here except the desire to learn. I hope that more students can come here to learn more life skills, return to support their communities, and spread that which we initiate at CIDECI. This is the hope of CIDECI-- that in doing this work our students can form a resistance back in their communities, joining in the greater movement of the indigenous and poor fighting exclusion by becoming autonomous from the bad government.”⁴⁹

To meet these goals CIDECI first makes itself accessible to all, especially those without the resources for a traditional, exclusive education. It then chooses to teach courses which provide the skills necessary for living and thriving in a world beyond capitalistic development. More strongly, as I have discussed in this paper, it serves as an alternative socializing agent in its practical form. CIDECI develops its administration, classes, and community in accordance with its more obvious curriculum to teach its goals more applicably, broadly, and basically. Immanuel Wallerstein, inaugurating the *Centro Immanuel Wallerstein* at CIDECI, expressed how CIDECI's educational function, hopes, and struggles come at a ripe time: “We live now in an important historical moment: this is the moment of the transition of the world system to a new historical system. In a period like this, all of us have the duty to help clarify what alternatives are possible and desirable.”⁵⁰ CIDECI's students not only have the opportunity to live in this moment, but they also have the resource of their education to build beyond it.

⁴⁹ Interview on April 28, 2006.

⁵⁰ “(Vivimos) ahora un momento histórico que es importante: es el momento de la época de transición del sistema-mundo actual hacia otro nuevo sistema histórico. En un periodo como este, todos nosotros tememos el deber de ayudar a esclarecer cuáles son las alternativas posibles y deseables Immanuel Wallerstein, mensaje enviado con motivo de la Inauguración del *Centro Immanuel Wallerstein* en San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México, septiembre de 2004. (Quoted in *La Crisis Estructural del Capitalismo*, 36).

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APPENDIX A:



La Panadería/ Bakery



Agricultura/ Agriculture



Corte y Confección/ Sewing



Telares/ Weaving



El Comedor/ Cafeteria



Outside After Class



CIDECI: Under Construction



The Other Campaign's
Conference for Women at CIDECI

APPENDIX B: San Andres Accords on Education

“4. Integral Indigenous Education. The various governments commit themselves to respect the educational tasks of the indigenous peoples within their own cultural space. The allocation of financial, material and human resources must be brought about with fairness to plan and carry out educational and cultural activities determined by the indigenous towns and communities.

The State must bring about the indigenous peoples' right to a free and quality education, as well as to encourage the participation of the indigenous towns and communities in selecting, ratifying and removing teachers, taking into consideration criteria on academic and professional performance previously agreed on by the indigenous peoples and the corresponding authorities, and to form supervisory committees on the quality of education within the framework of local institutions.

The right to bilingual and inter cultural education of the indigenous peoples is ratified. The definition and development of educational programs with regional content, where their cultural heritage is recognized, are established as the jurisdiction of federative entities in consultation with the indigenous towns. It will be possible, through educational action, to insure the use and development of indigenous languages, as well as the participation of towns and communities in conformance with the spirit of Agreement 169 of the OIT (International Labor Organization).”

<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/san_andres.html>

APPENDIX C: Future Possibilities of Study

If I could study more at CIDECI I would certainly want to continue learning the in the *tallers*, gaining more experiences like the ones I had in the bakery, fields, and the sewing and weaving courses. While my home community is different in many ways from the communities of most of CIDECI's students, I still look forward to sharing what I learned with my family and friends back in Virginia and New Jersey. Also, I am sure that with more time, such as the nine month course of study, I would become a more normalized student and gain a deeper understanding of the many things I could only touch upon here. Also, there is much to be learned by looking at how an education at CIDECI and the micro projects which follow impact the gender relations, political autonomy, and economic realities in the communities of its graduates. Also, numerous investigations could be carried out which look beyond my approach of studying CIDECI, with a finer gaze at its informal but strong connections to the Zapatista movement and the EZLN, the role of spirituality at CIDECI, and the co-functioning of the other SIIDENOFAL components, to name only a few possibilities.