

Indigenous Women - 600 Community Kitchens

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1. The Schooling-Poverty Binomial

The correlation between little or no schooling and poverty is so evident that we are used to seeing it as a cultural trait in the highly marginalized communities. This is mainly the case of indigenous and rural areas in Mexico. The correlation is seldom made explicit, even when it is the core of all approaches and referred to in education as a concomitant factor of development with or without the surname of sustainability.

Considering adult education which is our interest here we face the fact that the rate of dropouts in Mexico in 40 million in the year 2000.ⁱ The dropout phenomenon is strongly associated with extreme poverty, which has a decisive impact on school access and on school achievement. Shortcomings in enhancing quality within schools have contributed through the years to a large adult population without elementary education. Disaggregated data of dropout rates shows that indigenous populations have the lowest levels of schooling, nutrition and health in the country. Official statisticsⁱⁱ show that 41 per cent of adults within ethnic groups do not know how to read and write. Difficulties inherent in carrying out literacy programs and providing educational services in remote scattered populations are increased by existing monolingualism or incipient bilingualism in the ethnic regions.

The largest Mexican ethnic diversity is concentrated in the state of Oaxaca. Sixteen different ethnic groups live in this territory. Poverty rates in Oaxaca are among the highest in the country. In the same situation are the states of Chiapas and Guerrero that constitute the poorest states in Mexico. Oaxaca is characterized by heterogeneous mountain systems and rough topography. As a consequence, population centers are profusely scattered as can be observed from the following statisticsⁱⁱⁱ. The state population is 3,432,180. The number of municipalities amounts to 570 (the largest in the country). Population distribution in small towns is as follows:

Population rank	Number of Towns
1 – 49	4,537
50-99	1,322
100-499	2,823
500-999	630

As poverty is a determinant factor in our study, we quote the World Bank 2000-2001 Report regarding World Development in the chapter entitled “Attacking Poverty”^{iv}:

At the start of the new century, poverty remains a global problem of huge proportions. Of the world’s 6 billion people, 2.8 billion live on less than 2 dollars a day and 1.2 billion live on less than 1 dollar a day. Eight out of one hundred infants do not live to see their fifth birthday. Nine of every 100 boys and 14 of every 100 girls who reach school age do not attend school. Poverty is also evident in poor people’s lack of political power and voice and in their extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation, personal violence and natural disasters. And the scourge of HIV/AIDS, the frequency and brutality of civil conflicts, and rising disparities between rich countries and the developing world have increased the sense of deprivation and injustice for many.” (P.14)

2. DIC Program of DIF-Oaxaca

The National Nutrition Survey (ENAL) describes the children’s nutritional situation in the state of Oaxaca. These data show that two of every three children between one to five years old present undernourishment symptoms, and 37% of them are at high risk. The national children’s size census carried out by the DIF in 1994 showed an important deficit in the relationship age-size value (two standard deviations under the average value of the population of reference). According to this census the prevalence of small size in Oaxaca was over 40% and within children living in the indigenous shelter-schools, it was over 57 per cent.

In order to provide alimentary aid to the highly marginal population in Oaxaca, El Sistema de Asistencia Social para la Familia (DIF)^v has implemented different social assistance programs. The Programa para el Desarrollo Integral Comunitario (Integral Community Development Program) has had great acceptance in the communities. This program operates with federal, state and municipal funding. DIC’s objective is to contribute to the nutrition of children, women, old and disabled persons, as well as implementing viable productive units in highly marginal communities.

The program runs 600 community kitchens operating throughout the state. These kitchens receive a basic provision kit every three months. Each provision kit contains 14 different products for four people that have a cost of 15 dollars per unit, plus transportation fees amounting to three dollars for each kitchen supplied. Two meals are provided to beneficiaries, 5 days a week, according to the school calendar. Meal preparation starts at 4:00 a.m. and breakfast is served between 7:00 and 9:00 a.m. The second meal is served from 12:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Usually children have breakfast before they go to school and have their second meal when they leave it. Meals are prepared with provisions included in the kit. Since the kit does not contain any vegetables, the beneficiaries themselves provide vegetables when this is possible. A recipe booklet is provided to each kitchen with nutritional criteria that recommends the incorporation of local products into the meals. The number of beneficiaries attending these community kitchens was 88,500 according to March 2001 data.

People from the community as well as DIF personnel from the City of Oaxaca headquarters participate in the kitchen's operation. Community participants are designated in public assemblies held for this purpose. Community people do their work on a voluntary basis excepting the promoter who receives a symbolic payment of 35 dollars a month. The DIF personnel are hired on a contract basis.

A kitchen support committee organizes people in the community. The DIC committee has 7 members including the president, secretary, treasurer and four commissioned members to attend nutrition, health, basic sanitation and community work issue meetings. The committee role is to support the promoter activities assessing her in order to strengthen the social organization around the kitchen. It is common to find illiterate and non-Spanish speaking people within the committee. IN general, the promoter is a young woman who has finished elementary school and occasionally junior high school. The promoter is in charge of coordinating the kitchen teams, which are formed by indigenous women and mothers of the children attending the kitchen. Meal preparation, serving and cleaning activities are the responsibility of these women.

Parents, who do not eat at the kitchen, provide firewood and water. Promoters interact with local authorities in coordination with the DIC committee to carry out DIC program activities. Promoters also help in developing the beneficiaries' census, conducted by the regional coordinator. The promoter takes care of administrative issues such as the surveillance of meal preparation, organizing women in working teams (one for each day of the week). Additional duties include the information about operative problems that might interfere with the program efficiency to DIF personnel. The promoter also helps DIF personnel in keeping children size records (e.g. weight and height measurements). The DIC/DIF personnel include a general program coordinator, three project headpersons, eleven regional coordinators, 60 supervisors and 4 office clerks.

Supervisors have a strategic role in the DIC program, particularly related to working conditions. They have a fellow status, therefore they are not considered employees and do not have social security benefits. However, their role in the DIC program is considered strategic because they are the DIC staff who are periodically in contact with local authorities, committees and the promoters in the communities. Of all supervisors, 67% are women. Their education level is at senior high school level and they spend 20 days per month in the communities supervising the kitchens. Their assignments are mostly administrative including inventory and accounting for provisions; lobbying with local authorities and headquarters in Oaxaca City; and keeping records to assist community promoters.

Based on the food sustainability idea, the DIF-DIC in Oaxaca started the implementation of a Productive Units Program in November 2000. The program was intended to strengthen the kitchen operation in the communities. The implementation of these productive units was planned as a pilot experience in 75 or 600 kitchens. The

characteristics of the productive unit to be implemented were decided in a workshop held by the research team with the supervisors, the regional coordinators and the Program General Coordinator. The supervisors implemented a survey in the communities and brought the results to the workshop. Productive units were made up of poultry and fish breeding and a vegetable garden. Fish breeding is an innovative activity since there is no tradition in this sort of activity in these communities. For that reason, it was planned to include this activity in only 10 of the 75 selected communities.

The existing organization around the kitchens and the inherent dynamics associated with the implementation of the productive unit as part of the kitchen were seen by the present director of the research project as favorable circumstances that might increase the impact of the program due to educational intervention based on a pedagogical vision. The idea is that further learning may be enhanced by inducing participants to reflecting on their working experiences, recreate them, and use them as a starting point to develop new learning and abilities beyond those involved in the kitchen operation and the productive unit implementation.

Due to the research opportunities under these particular circumstances, a research group at the CIIDIR^{vi} in Oaxaca put together a joint education research project with the DIC program personnel to characterize the learning process of the people involved in the kitchen operation. The project was partially co-founded by the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and the National Council of Science and Technology (Oaxaca Branch).

The Adult Education Programs (AEP) offered by the Secretariat of Public Education in the country is the reference framework for this project. The project is relevant since the AEP have been unsuccessful in outreach activities, particularly adult interest in learning and thus improving their living conditions. Therefore, we think that an informal education experience linked to productive work based on the existing organization around the kitchens might be fertile ground to develop a model to deal with the dropout problem in the country. This model should be linked to people's work, utilizing the existing organization around the community kitchen.

The project is intended to design a pedagogical strategy that systematizes the learning process of indigenous women working in the DIF-DIC kitchens and in the productive units. The strategy includes the analysis of women's working experience as the core of their learning process. Learning guidelines toward reading and writing skills will derive from it, with the intervention of an educational agent. The program contents are not pre-established but they will gradually emerge from the participant's needs during the productive unit development.

Research project goals are:

- Reinforce DIF-DIC program activities from the educational perspective by training 35 young men and women involved in the kitchens' supervision functions.
- Develop three case studies of successful experiences in the DIC program.

The research project is being carried out with the participation of researchers of two other higher education institutions located in Oaxaca City. They are the Instituto Tecnológico Agropecuario de Oaxaca (Agriculture and Cattle Technological Institute of Oaxaca, ITAO) and the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (National Pedagogical University, UPN). The duration of the first stage of the research project is two years. The case studies will be developed in: Colonia Las Flores in the municipality of Eloxochitlán, Boca del Río in the municipality of Yoloxochitlán and Clemencia in the municipality of Santa María Chilchotla. All of these communities are located in the Mazateca Region near the town of Huautla de Jiménez.

3. Preliminary Results

The research project started July 2000. Since the beginning, all activities have been developed in three directions. First, the educational interventions carried out with the supervisors (Direction A). Secondly, three case studies were selected to point the development of the research project (Direction B). Finally, the theoretical inquiry was set as a permanent activity posed by the research process (Direction C).

Direction: A focus on the training activities of the supervisors. For this purpose, 16 different courses have been designed and taught. Courses have an average duration of 25 hours. The purpose of these courses is that supervisors may transmit their knowledge to people in the communities involved in the construction of the productive unit components. This includes the construction of the poultry houses, preparing the ground with the fertilizers for the vegetable garden, and the building of the fishing pool. The supervisor was at the communities when the poultry was delivered. Additional activities include chicken's vaccination along with community working groups. On purpose designed materials were available to follow up productive unit components construction. The development of case studies (direction B) includes several visits to selected communities where learning experiences will be documented. Case studies will be developed on three different topics: The productive unit, health issues and social organization strategies.

The productive unit

In the community of "Colonia Las Flores" two members of the research team help people to deal with some irregularities they found in the pool construction. Most of the problem-solving issues are affected by communication restrictions due to people in this

community speak very little Spanish or not at all. A fish-breeding formal course was scheduled for community people and provision was made to have a person translate to their native language (Mazateco). Specimens of local aquatic species were gathered in the river and in the adjacent creek for laboratory study. As a part of the training activities, an outline for the design of fishery teaching materials was developed.

Health

Data for health diagnosis was gathered in the community of Boca Del Rio. Dental disease among the population was the major concern for the researcher in charge. She visited two other communities even though the scheduled health education intervention will be carried out in Boca Del Rio, women from two other communities will attend the course to discuss basic health issues and learn how to cope with them. The health researcher got in touch with the teachers of the one room school operating at the community to jointly schedule a course for children. An outline for health teaching materials was developed.

Social Organization

Two members of the research team visited three communities and carried out interviews in Clemencia. What they are trying to find out is how local organization works out beyond local authorities pressure. They are concerned about the social implications regarding the productive unit. This is because they had the impression that people were not considering the productive unit as part of the kitchen but as a different project. Agreements on the voluntary basis of work related to the productive unit construction were established in the local assembly. This is a rule for all communities; however, among people working in the productive unit construction in Boca Del Rio, researchers noticed that people working in the construction of the pool considered that kind of work should be paid. A workshop to raise these issues and clarify the situation was scheduled. For the three cases a database will be created at CIIDIR in the city of Oaxaca.

The theoretical inquiry is the concern of direction C. Since we are dealing with a population whose learning capacities have been diminished by poverty conditions and the marginality and isolationism they live in, theoretical inquiry is needed to provide insight to re-orient research activities. The need for effective mediations that may stimulate those capacities is the reason why we are looking for literature related to adults' learning processes. In the literature review referred to adult education programs in developing countries, we notice an absence of studies related to the cognitive aspects involved in such learning processes. Adult Education studies generally center their concerns in the enhancement of adult motivation to learn. Proposals focus on techniques, methodologies and all kinds of didactic approaches for this purpose. However, there are not specific studies about cognitive processes in illiterate adult people and dropouts.

From this theoretical perspective, we dare to say that what happens with motivation, most of what has been studied with children and adolescents alike in cognition, intelligence

and learning-to-think issues, can be applied to adult education. With this idea in mind we have approached these fields.

During the exploratory visits to a sample of kitchens, the research team realized that the promoter was the competent person to perform the educational intervention with the indigenous women working in the kitchen, since she **lives** in the community and has daily interaction with them and with the committee. Notwithstanding this certainty, project's resources limitations do not permit, at this moment to do "in situ" training for the promoters. The issue however, is not only the financial aspect. The problem is that even if the funding is obtained to do "in situ" training, we still have to solve the question about how to approach such training under poverty and illiteracy conditions prevailing in DIC communities. This concern has taken us to explore the theoretical assumptions of disciplines related to education that we consider may re-orient our research. Encouraged by the idea that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" selected pieces of our literature review are presented next in this paper as well as comments on them.

Juan Eduardo Garcia Huidobro^{vii}, a specialist in the field depicts the scenario of Adult Education in Latin America as follows:

"Adult Education may look in other latitudes as an answer to profound cultural transformations that have made the knowledge transmitted through the school system insufficient and obsolete, in Latin America Adult Education is defined by its relationship with poverty. It is an education confronted to poor populations who are illiterate or who had a very limited access to school." P-27

Alexander N. Charles,^{viii} emeritus professor in Adult Education of the University of Syracuse proposes the mission of adult education as follows:

The mission of adult education is to assist adults to acquire further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies. Control enables adults to participate more intelligently and responsibly in their political, working, social, cultural, family, religious and natural environments, and in effect to improve the quality of their lives. P-32

We subscribe this mission presented by Charters and this is why, when comparing that mission with the reality that live those concrete adults we work with in the Mazateca Region, we consider that it is very difficult that as a consequence of the modest educational intervention they are exposed to now, they may acquire further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies. That is why ambivalences among the research team arise in terms of, on the one hand, privilege the scientific rigor that the study demands, and on the other, set priorities regarding practical activities which results are expected by DIF personnel. On top of this, there are time and resource constraints upon the research project. Donald Schon^{ix} stressing his idea of the reflective practitioner depicts in the following allegory, the situation we are in.

“In the topographical variety of professional practice there is a high, firm plateau elevated over a swamp. In the highlands, manageable problems are ready to be solved utilizing for that purpose theory and technique based on research. In the swampy lowlands, problems are confused and disturbing and do not accept a technical solution. The paradox in this situation is that problems in the highlands are of little importance for individuals and for the society as a whole even though its technical interest is big. In the swamp meanwhile, are the kinds of problems of main concern to people. Then, the professional must make a decision. Would he remain in the highlands where he can solve relatively insignificant problems according to his rigor guidelines, or would he descend to the swamp where important problems and no rigorous inquiry are? P-17.

In accordance with Schon allegory, our project context places us in the swamp. However, it is not easy to cut off rigorous research concerns, even though the question remains in the sense if rigorous research is possible outside the plateau. This concern for rigor is what has driven us to a cautious exploration in the field study of cognition. We acknowledge cognition as a matter of the psychology field; however, they mix in the intricacies of learning. In Feuerstein^x concept of mediating learning experience, for instance, we see a pedagogical endeavor applicative in adult education.

“The mediating agent in a mediated learning experience, often a parent or teacher, is one who mediates the world to the child by transforming the stimuli, selecting stimuli; scheduling them; framing and locating them in time and space; grouping certain stimuli or segregating others; providing certain stimuli with specific meanings as compared with others; providing opportunities for recurrent appearances; bringing together objects and events that are separate and discrete in terms of temporal and spatial dimension; revoking events and reinforcing the appearance of some stimuli; rejecting or deferring the appearance of others; and through this, providing the organism with modalities of selecting, focusing and grouping objects and events. What is even more important, the mediating individual enables the child to extend his activities over dimensions of reality that are not in his immediate reach either temporally or spatially. MLE (Mediated Learning Experience) is considered in this framework to be the determinant of the proper use of direct exposure to stimuli. The more an organism has been subjected to adequate levels of mediation, the greatest is its capacity to learn, i.e. to become modified, through direct exposure to stimuli.” (365-366)

We realize that the quality of the mediation as well as its length is decisive to enhance the capacity to learn. Therefore we have to find out how we can structure an adequate mediating process according to our circumstances.

In regard to limitations in mediating learning experiences, Feuerstein’s statement about results in poor intellectual performances, call our attention. The fact that the mediating learning experience done by the supervisors in the communities is so short, acceptable learning results is not expected. Feuerstein’s^{xi} statement is that

“...deficient intellectual performance typically results from a paucity of mediated learning experiences, which are essential if the child is to be able to benefit from exposure to environmental stimuli, it is not surprising that this program is intended to provide the learner with a phase-specific form of mediated learning experience designed to make up that deficit. The general goal is “to sensitize the individual so that he will be able to register, elaborate, and become modified by direct exposure to life events and experiences in such a way that learning and the efficient handling and use of incoming stimuli are increasingly facilitated” P-384

From this first approach to Feuerstein’s thought we can derive the analogy that the productive unit is the stimuli to which adults involved in the kitchen operations are exposed. Constructivism is another theoretical viewpoint we have considered as an input to our research study. Constructivists consider experience as the starting point for learning. Ernst Von Glassersfeld^{xiii} presents radical constructivist principles as follows:

Radical constructivism does not deny the possibility to know, but contends to demonstrate that knowledge is not the merchandise occidental philosophy tradition want to make us believe. Constructivism is a theory of active knowledge; it is not a conventional epistemology that considers knowledge as an incarnation of truth, which reflects the world “in itself” independently of the cognoscente subject. Two basic principles of radical constructivism are:

1. Knowledge is not received passively, not through the senses or by communication means but the cognoscente subject actively constructs it.
2. Cognition function is adaptive and serves for the organization of the subject experiential world not for the discovery of an ontological objective reality. P-23

Another theoretical approach we have consulted is the one developed by Raymond S. Nickerson (et al)^{xiii} regarding the teaching of thinking, which is intimately linked to cognitive development. This issue is in our particular interest because what we intend to do is to find effective ways to dynamize the cognitive structure of indigenous women involved in the kitchens operation. The selected segment of Nickerson’s work is as follows:

“Traditional approaches to education have focused on the teaching of “course content” material, which is to say imparting factual knowledge. By comparison, relatively little attention has been given to teaching of thinking skills-or at least to the teaching of the skills involved in such higher order activities as reasoning, creative thinking and problem solving. In focusing on thinking skills, one need not deny the importance of acquiring knowledge. Indeed, we question whether a strong distinction between thinking skills and knowledge-a distinction that has sometimes been drawn quite sharply-is really defensible. At the very least, we would argue that the two are interdependent. On the one hand, thinking is essential to the acquisition of knowledge, and on the other hand, knowledge is essential to thinking. Regarding this first point, some educators have questioned

whether factual knowledge can be assimilated effectively unless the student actively processes it in a thoughtful way. P-48

To finish this theoretical review, we want to quote Donald Schon's^{xiv} inspiring description of what he calls "trainers" for reflection in action

"As well as some persons learn to reflect in action, others learn to help them do it. These rare individuals are not so much "teachers" but "trainers" for reflection in action. Their artistic abilities consist in having off the top of their heads the particular adequate method to solve any difficulties the student is experiencing. And as this professional artistic ability demands a capacity for reflection in action, the ability of the trainer demands a capacity for reflection in action upon the intuitive way the student has to understand the present problem, the intervention that might put him in a fruitful situation, the proposal that might help him to move toward the next useful step". (210)

4. The Barriers

Poverty is a structural component in the adult education construct that we have under study. This component inevitably permeates our research work. Our position is that being poverty a very complex problem of huge proportions, a strong political will is required to solve it. However, from the big swamp we are in (alluding to Schon's metaphor) we look for a piece of firm land where a seed for alternatives might be planted.

Weaknesses of the study become apparent along its course. Among them, one, which increases its vulnerability, is the existing dependence from supervisors as mediating agents. The fact that among supervisors there is a permanent rotation of about 12 per cent, means that when one of them who has taken all the courses leave the program, it represents a loss of a mediating agent for our education purpose. The threat is real because this can happen at any moment, and it has actually happened with 14 of them. Anyhow, the leaving of the program by the supervisors is understandable, since they have always the expectation to find a job that offers them social security benefits. Therefore, when the opportunity shows up they take it.

Notwithstanding the above mentioned situation, even if we kept a supervisors "seed group" that take all the courses and remain in the program, that is not a solution. The issue is that, even though they visit periodically all the communities, they remain there only two or three days every six weeks. Besides, during their permanence in the communities, the administrative work they have to do, consumes a substantial amount of their time. Considering this situation, it is clear that even though their presence in the communities is on a regular basis, given the short time they have to interact with people, they become inadequate for the educational research purpose.

This is why in the next stage of the study we will start working with the promoters as learning mediators for women and the committees. The idea we have is that the regional coordinators train the promoters for this purpose. The research team will take care of the

regional coordinators training. Thus, if the project does not get funding to continue, at least a group of DIC personnel would be able to continue the educational process.

I would like to finish this presentation with a quotation of the book “The Challenge of World Poverty” by Gunnar Myrdal. This is considered to be a classic in the matter. I think it is worthy to point out that, even though the book was written in 1971, focusing postwar educational policies, what Myrdal says in 1971 is certainly true for many countries in 2001^{xv} in the following terms:

“Even though the postwar approach has thus remained in the sphere of vague generalities, it does imply certain assumptions which are unwarranted and of a nature to operate as opportunistic blinkers in research. Education is thus assumed to be a homogenous magnitude, measurable on the cost side in terms of financial expenditures. But as shown in *Asian Drama* and also stressed below, the *main reforms needed in education and in all underdeveloped countries are of a qualitative nature*”

They concern, first, not the quantity of education, least of all as simply measured by the financial expenditures. The emphasis should be on the distributional spread of the educational inputs among districts, social classes, and the two sexes. Reforms should also concern what is taught, with what intention, in what spirit, and with what effect, for instance in regard to willingness to perform manual work. Unfortunately much education in these countries is now even plain miseducation and apt to raise impediments for development.” P-169

ⁱ José Antonio Carranza, Director of the National Institute for Adult Education. Interview, La Jornada Journal. April 14, 2000.

ⁱⁱ INEGI(National Institute of Geography, Statistics and Electronic Information).

ⁱⁱⁱ INEGI, op.cit.

^{iv} World Bank 2000-2001 Report

^v DIF is a Public Decentralization Organism. It has legal status and its own patrimony which is regulated by the System for Integral Family Development in Oaxaca Law. It was published in the Diario Oficial of the state on February 4, 1993. Its main objectives are the promotion and social assistance to the different population sectors, direct assistance for children and women, and services in the field.

^{vi} Center for Interdisciplinary Research for Regional Integrated Development. The Center belongs to the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (National Polytechnic Institute).

^{vii} Lecturas Sobre Educacion de Adultos en America Latina. Recopilacion : Mingo, Aracely y Sylvia Schmelkes, CESU-UNAM 1997

^{viii} Primer in Adult Education, UNESCO, 1994

^{ix} Schon, Donald, A. (1992) "La Formacion de Profesionales Reflexivos. Hacia un nuevo diserio de la enserianza y el aprendizaje en las profesiones. » Paidos, Barcelona.

^x In Nickerson, Raymond et al (1985) Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Hillsdale, New Jersey

^{xi} In Nickerson, Op. Cit.

^{xii} In Marcelo Pakman, compilador, (1996). "Construccion de la Experiencia Humana" Vol. 1, Gedisa, Barcelona.

^{xiii} Op. Cit.

^{xiv} In Packman, Op. Cit.

^{xv} Myrdal, Gunnar. (1971) "The Challenge of World Poverty. A World Anti. Poverty Program Outline". Vintage Booksa, A Division of Random House, New York.