

Querio Seguir Adelante:
Education and Expectations Among Students, Teachers,
and a Bio-cultural Reserve in Yucatán, México

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Without the continued efforts among the people who founded Kiuic, namely Dr. George Bey III, Dr. Tomas Gallareta, and James Callaghan, and Gerardo Arzapalo I would never have come to Yucatán begin with. Thank you for all of your advice and continued support over the years.

FOREWARD

The following is a transcript of a handwritten application letter of a recent high school scholarship recipient from Yaxhachen, Yucatán, México in 2015. The next year, Victor chose to drop out of his first year of high school and return to Yaxhachen.

Yaxhachen, Oxkutzcab, Yucatán.

Asunto: solicitud de beca

Sr. y Sra. Ott

Responsables de la reserva ecologica [Kaxil Kiuic]

Por medio de la presente, y de la manera más entera me dirigió a ustedes para solicitar su apoyo con una beca económica porque quiero seguir estudiando. Y así salir adelante con mis estudios, yo sé que puedo y quiero aprender y así enseñar a mi familia. Con su ayuda saldré adelante Porque me darán los medios para poderlo realizar y seguir estudiando El estudio para mi es aprender y enseñar a los demás y por eso quiero que en un futuro, aprender y ser un ingeniero en computación para enseñar a los señores y señoras en manejo de una computadora.

Yo no tengo los medios suficientes en donde me pueda sostener con mis estudios.

Yo quiero ser ingeniero en computación. Y con eso conocer las tecnologías más avanzadas y tener maestros que me enseñen a utilizarlas. Y si me aceptan me comprometo a esforzarme mas y mas en mis estudios.

Sin más por el momento me despido de ustedes enviándoles un cordial saludo,

Victor Enrique Dzul Cauich

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All photos are by the author unless otherwise specified in the caption.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

“Quiero seguir adelante” is what the students told me when I asked them why they wanted to keep studying. Coming from a rural town without a high school, surrounded by dense forest, sustained by subsistence agriculture and/or migrant remittances, and speaking mostly Yucatec Maya, these middle school students saw the opportunity to study high school as a way to “get ahead” in life. This thesis seeks to evaluate a high school scholarship program developed by Kaxil Kiuic in rural Yucatán, México for the residents of two communities, Yaxhachen and Xkobenhaltun.

Kaxil Kiuic is a Mexican non-profit (A.C.) owned and operated by Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. Kaxil Kiuic, in turn, manages the Helen Moyers Biocultural Reserve in Southern Yucatán, a 4,000 acre piece of land nestled between the two communities. In 2006, Kaxil Kiuic received funding from a private donor to begin a scholarship program, in accordance with the reserve's "bio-cultural" mission to foster local participation in ecological conservation. Over the 10-year span of the program, 18 scholarship students were chosen, living and studying away from their families during the week. Less than half of the scholarship recipients graduated high school. Those who have graduated experience only marginally better opportunities for employment. Many parents and students now question the practical value of high school education for their

children. For Kaxil Kiuic, in turn, these results call into question the value of a high school scholarship program as an effective development project.

In this research project, I use ethnographic interviews with previous scholarship students, faculty, and staff from the local middle school to explore the goals that each of these stakeholders has for education. What do they all share in common and where do they differ? In addition to those interviews, I draw on informal interviews and observations of the school and Kaxil Kiuic from a recent research trip funded by the Tinker Foundation and my previous experiences as a three-time summer archaeology assistant at Kaxil Kiuic and manager of the scholarship program during the 2012-2013 school year. Reflecting upon these interviews and experiences, I find that the scholarship program and the school system reinforce standards that are irrelevant to the lived realities of people in these towns. Many young people enjoy living in their *pueblo* with their families and friends, but many would like to improve their quality of life by generating more income. The way that the school system and, by extension, Kaxil Kiuic suggest that they improve their standard of living is by moving out of the community and pursuing education and careers with the hope that they would be able to come back someday and benefit their pueblo. Some scholarship students and their parents have shared this dream, but the difficult path through formal education for these students and the lack of local employment opportunities make that a lofty—and still unrealized—dream.

In the context of the history of indigenous education and bio-reserve development strategies in México, this disjuncture is not surprising. In fact, across the Americas and throughout the world, indigenous people struggle for self-determination in education, conservation, and development programs directed by states and non-governmental

organizations alike. Even well meaning actors struggle to develop programs where practice and outcomes correspond to expressed ideals.

Ultimately, I argue that institutional demands of the school and bioreserve limit the opportunity for local people to participate and make decisions about how the school or the scholarship program could respond to their needs and desires. I point to Paulo Freire's theories of praxis and critical pedagogy as useful analytical lenses through which to examine these shortcomings. I then use those theories to suggest ways to synergize the efforts of the school and Kaxil Kiuic's scholarship program with the interests of these rural students. In order to really make an impact in the rural communities like Yaxhachen, the school system and the scholarship program must begin to focus on the developing the resources that students have at hand: their language, local knowledge, *pueblo* social networks, and their desire to help one another and their families.

Who are YOU?

As an ethnographer, I go into a foreign place and try to understand who people are, what they believe, and how they live. My research is based in personal experience mapped by the most qualitative data points you could imagine: semi-structured interviews that wander every which way, informal interviews that fade into friendly conversations, and quiet observations of daily life. With this particular subject, my research is even more personal because I am deeply involved with the institution and the group of people under study. I came to Kaxil Kiuic studying anthropology at Millsaps College under Dr. George Bey III, the lead archaeologist and fundraiser for the reserve. I studied abroad in Yucatán for a semester, came back to do archaeology for three summers, and wrote an honors thesis on Disney and globalization in Yucatán with Dr.

Bey as my director. When I graduated from Millsaps, I moved to Yucatán for a year to manage the scholarship program where I developed working relationships and friendships with many of the students, teachers, and family members that are interviewed here. Throughout all of these experiences, I have met so many informants-come-friends in the towns, school, and Kiuic that I feel indebted to this place and the people. As a result, these personal relationships have had a huge impact on the shape of this thesis.

Ruth Behar, a renowned ethnographer, commented that as anthropologists “our intellectual mission is deeply paradoxical, get the ‘native point of view,’ *pero por favor* without actually ‘going native’”(5). This traditional view of the anthropological mission suggests that, ideally, anthropologists should be able to get a glimpse of life from the subject's point of view while still keeping two rational feet firmly on the ground. My Yucatec Maya 101 language skills and my clumsy soccer feet preclude me from making any sort of claim to being a native of Yaxhachen or Xkobenhaltun, but at this point I am certainly a "native" of Kaxil Kiuic and at least a welcome migrant to those *pueblos*. Considering my position, it's hard to say that I can be a completely objective observer in my analysis of this scholarship program. I want to see the best in the people involved, including myself, and I tend to try to focus on their strengths and excuse their weaknesses.

This bias is most palpable in my analysis of Kaxil Kiuic. The villains of anthropological and social science narratives are often the institutions or the larger structures that work to limit the meaningful participation of a marginalized group of people. For an outside researcher, it would be easy to fall into that sort of genre convention and suggest that Kiuic is this big, bad institution that pretends to be interested

in community development, but really only cares about creating profit for the college and for the reserve. However, as a "native" of Kiuic, this is a difficult accusation to make, because I would be condemning myself and others whom I believe to be working earnestly. Like Alice in front of the Caterpillar, I feel as if I am in a constant state of transformation, and I'd like to extend that benefit of the doubt to the humans that make up the institution of Kaxil Kiuic.

Methods

Over the course of five weeks in the summer of 2014, I conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with previous scholarship students (n=3), faculty and staff from the middle school in Yaxhachen (n=8), and community members from the town (n=3). These interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is the second language of the students and community members. The interviews lasted anywhere between thirty minutes and an hour each. Each participant signed a consent form outlining the guidelines for the use of the interview data and protections of the individuals' personal identities. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the conversations, the names of the participants have been changed and any individual identifying information has been excluded from this paper.

Primarily, my research was based in the middle school, so most of my observations and interviews took place in the school. Every weekday for four weeks, I went to the school to conduct interviews and participant observation by sitting in on classes, playing sports with students and teachers, and participating in other school activities. Every member of the faculty and staff accepted interviews with me, including six teachers, the principal, the grounds keeper, and the office secretary. Over the course of my research, I

became friends with many of these people, and so the interviews reflect only a fraction of the interactions I had with my "informants." Considering the amount of time I spent in the school and with the faculty, staff, and students of the middle school, the space, people, and culture of the middle school represent the strength and the heart of the ethnographic research I conducted over the summer.

In order to bring in the students' voices to my paper, I interviewed three previous scholarship students that I had known when I was managing the scholarship program the year before. I chose to interview these three students, because I knew each of them valued education and would be open to talking to me about their experiences. Barley and Bath (2014) argue that ethnographic research with young people in particular requires a period of familiarization between the researcher and the children involved in the research. They explain: "In all studies, but particularly when working with (potentially) vulnerable participants, such as children or so-called 'hard to reach' groups, researchers need to be prepared and committed to the ground work of familiarization before starting to collect their data" (Barley and Bath 2014, 194). Although all of these previous scholarship students were 18 years or older, having a base of experiences together outside of my research created common ground between them and me, allowing for a safe and open interview.

While I was managing the scholarship program, I conducted short open-ended interviews of the past scholarship students, including some that did not graduate. The resulting interviews were uncomfortable at times when I would try to dig deeper about their experiences in school and work afterwards. I suspect that I may have seemed critical or judgmental about their decisions and struggles. For this research project, I did not

interview any scholarship students who did not complete high school, because I personally felt uncomfortable showing up and interviewing someone about these sensitive issues without having worked or interacted with them before. So, in my ethnography, there is a bias towards students who have been successful in high school. However, I think that the scholarship recipients that I interviewed provided me with valuable insights into the general perspective of other students from Yaxhachen.

Finally, I bring in the perspective of Kaxil Kiuic through my personal experiences working as the scholarship manager and archaeology assistant. I did not conduct any formal interviews with members of the reserve, because the initial research design did not include interviews with reserve researchers and staff. Thus, formal interviews would not be permissible by the Institutional Review Board for inclusion in this thesis. I use the mission statement of the organization to define the objectives of the Reserve's "bio-cultural" objectives and context of other bioreserves to highlight the complexity of such a mission. Through this analysis, along with my own personal and work experience at the Reserve, I feel as if I have adequately represented Kaxil Kiuic as a stakeholder in the communities of Yaxhachen.

Research Question

The guiding research question has also been in a state of continual transformation. When I departed the scholarship program in the summer of 2013 to go to Tulane University for an Master's program in Latin American Studies, I knew I wanted to try to delve into the question of why students were dropping out of the scholarship program so regularly and how migration to the U.S. factored into that equation. When I began coursework for the MA program, I took a political science survey course of immigration

issues where I began to analyze immigration from a macro level. I learned that remittances from the United States to México could positively affect health, education levels, and infant mortality in poor areas of the country (Lopez-Cordoba 2005). However, recent academic literature suggests that frequent out-migration from a town can create a “culture of migration” which perpetuates the need for migration (Cohen 2001). So, essentially, the primary research question at the start was, “Does a ‘culture of migration’ exist in Yaxhachen?” And, if so, how does it affect educational aspirations in children?

While I was managing the scholarship program, I met many students with parents in the United States who said that they themselves wanted to migrate across the border. Thus, I prepared a lot of questions for students and teachers about how migration affects their educational aspirations and their teaching experiences, respectively. The students I interviewed had all graduated high school and were looking for employment and further education in Yucatán. Each of them had either a brother or an uncle in the United States, yet they had chosen to stay close to home. I wanted to know how they avoided migrating and whether they struggled with the decision. They told me that they would never consider migrating away from their family—it just wasn’t worth it. The teachers said that this attitude is becoming more and more common among students, especially as the going rate for crossing the border illegally can be as much as \$10,000 now. I began to realize that the issue of migration was certainly related to education, but a more important question began to emerge: “what is formal education good for?”

During an interview, a previous scholarship student told me that his peers and adults in the town had criticized him for continuing to study. “What are you studying for?” they would ask him, “You’ll just wind up back here.” I already knew that many

families in Yaxhachen believed that their children's time was better spent at home and in the fields. It seemed like a pragmatic decision, but to hear that scholarship students faced continual criticism from their peers and adults in the town was news to me. This insight resonated deeply with me, because as an anthropology major in undergrad and a MA student in Latin American Studies, I have had to answer the "what are you going to do with *that*" question a million times. I have the good fortune of coming from a family that supports my interest in studying anthropology and Latin American studies, but for people from Yaxhachen, the margin for error is much smaller. Realizing that many people in Yaxhachen are skeptical of formal education made me question my role in promoting high school without a clear vision for how students could use that education to achieve their own goals. In turn, I began to focus my research on the goals and capabilities of students in Yaxhachen and to wonder how we could try to respond to the desires of the multitudes of students and parents who want to improve their lives while staying in Yaxhachen.

Theory

At some point or another, all good fieldwork must come to an end, and the researcher must return to the library to try to make sense of all he or she has experienced in the field. Ruth Behar lampoons the transient anthropologist, "when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you've read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you're on your way to doing anthropology" (Behar 1996, 5). Behar echoes the postmodern contempt for ethnographic research that seeks to explain a culture objectively, despite the highly subjective nature of ethnographic methods.

Although I don't think she is condemning Marx, Weber, et al., she raises the question of what value those foundational theorists in the social sciences actually have to offer to our experiences today.

At the very least, these social theorists offer us intriguing metaphors to put what we see into a larger context. Clifford Geertz, the father of symbolic anthropology, suggested that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz 1973, 5). Geertz was echoing an idea proposed by Max Weber early in the 20th century that understanding the personal motivations and values of individuals is fundamental to understand a society as a whole. This idea that human experience is subjective and constructed has been a central theme in sociology and anthropology since the writings of Karl Marx. One of Marx's fundamental arguments was that the act of desiring and purchasing commodities is not neutral; in fact, this seemingly simple act actually recreates a very complex web of labor relations and power dynamics. When I buy a new iPhone, Marx would argue, I am distracted by the "magical" qualities of the iPhone: how it makes me feel powerful somehow holding it in my hand or how it makes me feel like I'm a part of a certain class of people. This is what Marx calls “commodity fetishism.” What remain hidden are the exploitative labor relations in Chinese factories and the ecological cost of mining rare metals involved in creating my iPhone. Gramsci argued further that ideologies and cultures that may seem harmless or pleasurable are actually the cornerstones to the strength and resilience of capitalism, the pervasive cultural hegemony of the powerful. In light of these indictments of culture and ideology, generations of academics in various schools of thought have examined how this

hegemony pervades the design of our cities, the media we consume, the words we say, and even the thoughts we think.

The webs of meaning and social relations that humans have spun now form a complex network that is global and transnational, and it's all too obvious that those webs are filled with spiders. However, it's important to remember that humans are the crowd-sourced architects of this network and our own actions spin these webs. When people break down social constructions like gender, age groups, or race and start interacting across those lines, by talking, playing or working, they are spinning new webs that make us think differently about our material reality. What frustrated Ruth Behar about the run-of-the-mill anthropologist was the disconnected, objective approach they take to their research without recognizing or acknowledging that their own subjective experiences have shaped the way that they interpret the actions of others. Once we acknowledge that our own understanding is limited, however, two crucial questions emerge: If nothing is really true and the world as we perceive it is just that—our perception—then how can we as researchers feel that our work is valuable and that our perspective is useful? Furthermore, if our worldview and actions are somehow predetermined by the prevailing economic system which creates inequality and suffering, how can we hope to step outside of that logic to create change within that system?

The process of translating theoretical insights into action is referred to as *praxis*. The meaning of the term has been developed over many years, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, continued by Marx, Gramsci, and others, and recently popularized by Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire. Aristotle defined praxis as a type of knowledge of economics, politics, and ethics which leads to practical action (Encyclopedia of Paulo

Freire, on Praxis). For Marx, praxis referred to human action or labor, which he divided into two categories: labor that recapitulate the capitalist market and labor that has the potential to free workers from the system. Then, Gramsci used the term to describe the struggle of oppressed people to gain a critical perspective on their place within a society (Tierney, W. & Sallee, M. 2008, 676-682). Paulo Freire's notion of praxis unifies Marx and Gramsci's emphasis on labor and critical perspective, respectively, by defining praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000, p. 51). Freire shares the Marxist view of capitalist society as a dehumanizing system for the marginalized majority, and praxis is his prescription for empowering those marginalized people to create social change.

Paulo Freire used this notion of praxis as the foundation of a theory of critical pedagogy, a method of teaching which seeks to eliminate the power dynamics between teachers and students and replace them with a relationship in which knowledge, created and shared among peers, informs action. Freire notices that many oppressed people do not fully understand their circumstance and that sometimes they may even idolize their oppressors. This lack of awareness he explains, is a barrier to social change: "reality cannot be modified, except when man discovers that it can be modified and that he can do it" (Freire 1987, 40). Therefore, the first task of an educator practicing critical pedagogy is *conscientization*, meaning to "[provoke] a critical attitude, of reflection, that entails a commitment to action" (ibid.). Ultimately, Freire argues that dominated subjects can become the critical, curious agents of change through this process of critical pedagogy.

If a group of people are to become aware of their condition and their untapped power to change it, then that implies that someone or some group must be the agent of change, probably someone from outside the community and potentially a different socio-economic class. Reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I wonder what my role as a white, middle class, university-educated, American male could be in enlightening rural Maya speakers in Yucatán of their oppression? Freire argues that, "authentic revolution attempts to transform the reality which begets this dehumanizing state of affairs. Those whose interests are served by that reality cannot carry out this transformation; it must be achieved by the tyrannized, with their leaders" (1968, 78). As someone who has not experienced the "tyranny" of oppression, it is imperative that I reflect critically about how my worldview and actions, however insignificant they may seem, can recapitulate power structures and limit authentic participation from the people I wish to help.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I have been reflecting very deeply and critically about these questions, and it's quite easy to see that power and ideology express themselves in the decisions I make. For example, throughout this thesis, I provide examples of the various ways indigenous people and culture have been legitimately oppressed in Yucatán for centuries. However, in my speech and in my writing, I usually convey the condition of the people in Yaxhachen as "marginalized" or "underserved," but rarely "oppressed." One reason for this is that I'm not sure that the term "oppressed" would resonate with the people of the town as a way to describe themselves. Another is that this word choice depoliticizes the concept of poverty, and thus makes it easier to share with a wider, perhaps more politically diverse audience. No one forced me to use

"marginalized," but declaring that I want to work to free the Maya from their oppression is the quickest way to draw suspicion from the government, Kaxil Kiuic, and the residents themselves. The scholarship program of Kaxil Kiuic and the school system are filled with examples of how the institutional context shapes how humans turn ideals into action. The goal for the following chapters is to identify the most significant barriers to effective communication and participation among the various stakeholders in education and what the feasible opportunities are for cultivating more critical, curious, and active participation of the people themselves in their education and the development of their town.

Roadmap to Chapters

The chapters in this thesis are organized spatially, in order to contextualize the histories of the town, the school, and Kaxil Kiuic. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 begins with my ethnographic description of the town of Yaxhachen. I use interviews with previous scholarship students and community members in order to describe daily life in the town and the expectations and goals that those individuals have. The main purpose of this chapter is to lay out the economic situation that constrains these people while recognizing that the lives they lead are often fulfilling and desirable for them. Chapter 3 introduces the middle school teachers who commute to Yaxhachen every weekday to hold classes. I illustrate how the recent educational reforms mandating intercultural education have grown out of assimilationist educational projects of the 20th century. Interviews with faculty and staff and observations in the school reveal the instability of teachers' jobs and the lack of resources as constraints to fulfilling the ideals of intercultural education. I argue that, despite these constraints, the earnest efforts of the

teachers and the atmosphere of respect for the Maya-speaking students in the school creates a potential space for collaboration among the community, school, and Kaxil Kiuic. The last body chapter focuses on Kaxil Kiuic. I trace the development of the reserve and place it within the context of other bioreserves in México. I find that Kiuic leads investors and academics to believe that a high degree of participation of local people in community development projects, but the reality is that participation is low to non-existent. In the final chapter, I discuss my findings and suggest ways to increase local participation in determining worthwhile projects while working within the inherent constraints of the school and Kaxil Kiuic.

Chapter 2:

Who are the “Maya” people of Yucatán?

If you go looking for the Maya of southern Yucatán you might never find them. Instead, you'll probably find a lot of people who identify as *mestizo/a* speaking Yucatec Maya. If you do stumble upon someone that calls themselves Maya, they will admit that the Yucatec Maya they speak is mixed with too much Spanish to be “pure” Maya. But the *real* Maya speakers, they'll tell you, are somewhere further south in another pueblo beyond the horizon. Popular ideas of Maya-ness among Maya speakers in Yucatán and the wider public often focus on a connection to the ancient past: a “pure” Mayan language, pyramids, ancient Maya spiritual beliefs, etc. A genealogical and linguistic connection certainly exists between the ancient Maya and the people living amid the ruins today, but it's important to emphasize that the term "Maya" has never been a natural category of a homogenous group of people. In order to introduce the Maya speakers of Yaxhachen, it is important that we trace the development of the “Maya” ethnic category over time and explore what it means and who uses it.

This process by which people acquire an ethnic identity is referred to as "ethnogenesis" in anthropology and the social sciences. The spark of ethnogenesis can be fundamentally external (i.e. state-defined census categories) or internal, whereby a group of people begin to explicitly identify with a particular ethnic label. Matthew Restall (2004) finds that, before the Spanish Conquest, family and city associations were the

primary identities that ancient Maya people used when speaking about themselves and argues that the Spanish colonial government created the ethnic label “Maya” as a way to describe the “Indians” of Yucatán who referred to their language as *maayat'aan*. Quetzil Casteñada, an ethnographer of Yucatán, compares the development of Maya as an ethnicity to the census-bubble racial categories in the United States: "Maya identity—or "Maya" as the identity of ethnicity—is like the ethnicity of "Hispanic" in the USA, i.e., an invented and politically constituted identity. It is an interpellation by the state [...] or the colonial regime, of its citizen/subjects as Hispanic or as Maya" (2008: 39). Put simply, "Maya" people have become "Maya" because colonial and national governments (and later, tourists and researchers) began to address them that way. Like so many people who feel ambivalent about or reject the labels of Hispanic or Latino in the U.S., many Yucatec Mayan speakers identify more strongly as “*mestizo/a*” (“mixed”) or as a member of their particular religion instead of “Maya.” This does not mean that they are denying an essential or true part of their past; instead, they are denying an ethnic category that poorly reflects the way they see themselves in relation to other Yucatec-Mayan speakers.

In the early 1990s, The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) rallied marginalized towns in rural Chiapas against the Mexican state, mobilizing the “Maya” people to value their indigenous identity and fight for self-determination in opposition to capitalism and the Mexican government. Similarly, the Pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala linked together diverse Maya-speakers around the country to fight back against harsh repression and assimilation by the Guatemalan state. Paul Sullivan explains, “Mayas [of Guatemala and Chiapas] who had been recruited and organized to fight for their rights as workers and peasants in a Marxist paradigm of armed struggle eventually

turned instead to non-violent means to advance their rights as indigenous people still suffering under the vestiges of Spanish colonialism” (Sullivan 2014, 261). By rallying under a common ethnic identity and projecting themselves as a unified Maya people, these indigenous movements have revolutionized their relationships with state and the outside world.

In Yucatán, there hasn't been any major mobilization of Mayan speakers like those in Chiapas and Guatemala since the Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901). For more than 50 years, in Yucatán tensions between landless indigenous farmers and land-holding elites or “vecinos” came to a head in “what was arguably the largest peasant uprising in nineteenth century Latin American history” (Dutt 2014, 740). Powerful vecinos wrote much of the official history and “portrayed the uprising as a *guerra de castas* [...] in which indigenous rebel protagonists had waged a violent confrontation against the *vecinos*” (741). However, many historians of the period argue that the racial or class rhetoric oversimplifies the complex ethnic boundaries and economic motives at play in the conflict (Gabbert 2004, Restall 2004). In fact, Matthew Restall argues that a regional Maya or peasant identity could not have emerged, because by the end of the Caste War the people of Yucatán were as “divided as they had ever been, with numerous native groups [...] existing at various points along a spectrum between full incorporation into the Mexican state of Yucatán and complete autonomy” (Restall 2004, 81).

At the start of the Caste War, the government instituted laws that forced indigenous people to submit to the state, and “corporal punishment became an accepted way to force ‘docility’ and ‘submissiveness’ on indigenous people” (Dutt 2014, 741). This precedent for violence against indigenous people set during the Caste War paved the

way for a system of debt peonage in Yucatán that was indistinguishable from chattel slavery. John Kenneth Turner, an American writer and reporter, took a trip to Yucatán in 1908 under the guise of being a potential investor in the henequen plantation system of the state. He found that wealthy planters controlled indigenous people by tempting them into taking loans and ensuring they could never pay back that debt, thus becoming *de facto* slaves. Turner described the horror of what he saw:

The slaves of Yucatán get no money. They are half starved. They are worked almost to death. They are beaten. A large percentage of them are locked up every night in a house resembling a jail. If they are sick they must still work, and if they are so sick that it is impossible for them to work, they are seldom permitted the services of a physician. The women are compelled to marry, compelled to marry men of their own plantation, and sometimes are compelled to marry certain men not of their choice. There are no schools for the children. Indeed, the entire lives of these people are ordered at the whim of a master, and if the master wishes to kill them, he may do so with impunity. (Turner 1910, 23)

This system of debt peonage controlled the poor population of Yucatán who became the backbone of the henequen plantation economy, earning massive profits for the planters and politicians of Yucatán.

After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921), life began to change substantially for indigenous people across México. Debt peonage was abolished, minimum wages for all workers were established, and property taken from indigenous people began to be returned (Loewe 2011, 26). In 1934, President Lázaro Cárdenas initiated ambitious land reforms and expanded public education as two ways of creating Mexican citizens out of rural and indigenous peasants. *Ejidors*, communal lands for subsistence farmers, were expropriated from large haciendas to give people without land a place to work and grow crops. Primary schools were founded across the new Republic even in rural pueblos in order to promote literacy. Although both of these initiatives suggested a new era of

working towards social equality, they promoted assimilation to one national Mexican culture of *indigenismo* that heralded a new culturally mixed race of Mexicans, *mestizos*, as the way towards progress for the new Republic of México.

Indigenismo is an oxymoronic ideology, because at first glance it seems value indigenous identity but only as a subset of this new, Mexican identity. Under *indigenismo*, all classes were expected to participate in the cultural mixing in order to ensure the progress of the nation. Ronald Loewe perfectly describes the mentality of the social Darwinists in México City at the time:

While the numerous Indian cultures that dotted the landscape were incapable of unifying the country because they lacked a common heritage and common language, Mexicans of European ancestry were unfit for the task because of their slavish addiction to foreign fashion and their lack of patriotism. The *mestizo*, on the other hand, was the quintessential bourgeois whose rise to power coincided with the evolution or expansion of individual rights in property, the *sine qua non* of the modern nation-state (Loewe 2011:4).

The *mestizo* identity embodied the ideal citizen of the new Mexican Republic who no longer had ties to the distant past (European or Mesoamerican) but instead were loyal to the present and future development of a unified nation. However, the conversion efforts were focused primarily on the indigenous population. President Lázaro Cárdenas himself proclaimed that, “our problem with indigenous people does not consist in keeping the Indian ‘Indian’ nor in making México indigenous, but in Mexicanizing the Indian” (translated and quoted in Gabbert 2004, 90).

A detailed history of how the people of Yaxhachen and their ancestors participated in the Caste War, debt peonage, and *indigenismo* transformation projects is outside the scope of this research. However, it is important to understand these broad strokes of race and class dynamics across the history of Yucatán in order to explain why

the people of Yaxhachen commonly refer to themselves as *mestizo* instead of Maya. Now that tourism and cultural heritage have become the hallmarks of the economy in Yucatán, Maya identity and culture have become fashionable and lucrative. Without knowing this history, a traveler to Yucatán will see the pyramids, hear the Mayan language spoken in the villages, and might think that Maya speakers are simply ignorant of their ancient past. On the contrary, it is obvious that both ethnic labels, “Maya” and “mestizo,” are political and social constructions that have been developed through exclusion, violence, repression, and assimilation. The marginalized position of people in Yaxhachen, their *mestizo* identity, and their skepticism with which they approach formal education which I will discuss in the second half of this chapter can be seen in this light as the result of those repressive historical forces.

Chapter 3: The Students of Yaxhachen



Figure 1. Map of Yucatán, México indicating location of Yaxhachen

Yaxhachen is a rural pueblo of around 2,000 people that began to be settled around 1900. Reportedly, the first families named the town “first water well,” because it was in that spot that they found a natural formation that collected water. Water is a most precious resource in the Yucatán peninsula, because there are no above ground rivers or lakes. Geographically isolated and initially disconnected from water and electricity grids, residents made life work amid drought and occasional hurricanes and the town grew and grew. Now, rutty dirt roads have been traded for paved roads—with potholes on par with New Orleans—and every day (but Sunday) residents with vans provide transportation to

and from the municipal capital of Oxkutzcab, where residents purchase food, consumer goods, and medical services unavailable in Yaxhachen. Along this road, family *milpas* (small agricultural plots on community land) extend further and further from the center of the town, and the lands are now sometimes tilled, plowed, and seeded in neat rows by entrepreneurial residents with tractors, and televisions and Western-style clothes have become common in the town due to remittances from the United States. Yet, life in Yaxhachen continues to revolve around cultivating the *milpa* by hand and raising small farm animals for subsistence.

Growing up in Yaxhachen, every member of the family helps support the household. From a young age, young boys learn to work in the *milpa* (field) with their father and brothers planting and harvesting corn throughout the year. Young girls sometimes work in the *milpa* as well, but mostly they stay home and help with chores around the house or prepare tortillas on the *koben*, a wood-burning stove built on three stones. In this chapter, I want to bring in the narratives of four male scholarship students that I worked with: Fernando, Juan, Saul, and Dario (names have been changed for privacy). Fernando and Juan were new scholarship students when I joined the program. Saul was a graduating senior at the time, and Dario had gone on to study at a technical school after graduating high school the year before I arrived. Their stories highlight the struggle involved for indigenous students to continue studying and finding work outside of their community.

All of the scholarship students I spoke with dreamed of working outside of the community in order to make a better living. Fernando aptly explained what life as a young person in Yaxhachen: "we work hard, like going to the field, carrying wood,

planting the *milpa*, a lot of things like that. It's always under the sun and hard—a *little* hard, let's say. The majority of people from Yax. have gotten used to it." Dario reflected on his parents' labor, "when I look at how my family works, they go to work at 7 in the morning and come back around 8 or 9 at night from working under the sun and they earn very little. That's something my dad didn't want me to do. That's why I want to *superarme* (make myself better)." In order to do that, Dario, Fernando, and the other scholarship students followed the advice of his teachers and continued studying after high school. Ultimately, their goal is to find a job that will support them and keep them close to home.

Jobs that pay a living wage are hard to find. Upon graduating, many people take jobs as temporary field hands or masons' assistants to earn extra money, but these jobs are poorly paid and offer little stability. Better-paid, relatively more secure jobs are available in supermarkets and pharmacies an hour away in Oxkutzcab, but they require a high school education, work experience, and—maybe most importantly—an open position. Saul graduated recently and aspired to get a job in Oxkutzcab, but after applying to different jobs and never hearing back, he recently settled for working in the nearby fields in the meantime, saying "*ya me cansé*." In terms of pure academic performance, Saul was not the best student in high school. He read very slowly, struggled to comprehend lessons, and often had to take extra exams to pass the classes he failed. However, what he lacked in academic ability, he made up in enthusiasm, gratitude, and persistence. Once he graduated high school, he hoped that his hard work and perseverance would pay off, but after putting in applications around Oxkutzcab and not hearing back, he became discouraged and has settled for manual labor. Talking with

business owners informally in Oxnard, I've learned that owning a store, a washateria, a restaurant, or a taxi can help support a family, but even then those people struggle to earn a living that allows them to improve their quality of life the way they had hoped. In school, Saul had teachers and peers that could help him, but in the working world, everyone has to face the struggle of finding a job themselves.

The only sure way that people from Yaxhachen have found to improve their quality of life substantially is by migrating to the United States. Walking around Yaxhachen, unfinished houses being built with cement-block walls and tile floors represent the "development" dreams of local people who have crossed the border to the United States. Over the past 20 years or so, hundreds of young men from Yaxhachen have borrowed money from family members to pay for their trip across the border. They meet up with a *coyote* on the border, and risk being detained by border patrol, dehydration, or getting shot by criminals or vigilantes along the way (Nevins and Azeiki 2008). No matter the result, the cost of crossing is high. Coyotes now charge anywhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per migrant, and in the era of stricter border enforcement that fee is sure to continue rising.

When migrants from Yaxhachen make it past the border, most of them work their way up to San Francisco or Portland where they connect with the family members or friends who supported their crossing. Without the initial support of these social networks, the initial costs of migrating would be too high to finance. Many migrants spend over ten years in the United States paying back that loan and remitting money to their families as regularly as possible to support the household. In this way, migrant workers can provide

much needed support to buy food, healthcare, and clothes to their family members or even to pay for satellite television, an automobile, or the construction of a new house.

On the macro level, remittances from the United States seem to alleviate the effects of poverty in many communities in México. A recent, nation-wide study of Mexican municipalities confirms that "an increase in the fraction of households receiving remittances" reduces rates of infant mortality, illiteracy, and poverty in that region (Lopez-Cordoba 2005, 218). However, on the local level in many communities across México like Yaxhachen, the effect of migration seems much more ambivalent. In a rural town in México, Macias et al. (2009) notice that remittances fail to foster real growth in the local economy because the majority of those resources are spent in businesses outside of their small community. Moreover, the town has a small customer base, limiting the local opportunities for entrepreneurs, and a fluctuating work force due to the rate of emigration to the United States (Macias et al. 2009, 157). These factors in turn begin a cycle that creates and recreates the need for remittances for support, and thus create a "culture of migration" within the hometown of migrants (Cohen 2004).

During my interviews, I found that having a member of the family in the United States does not necessarily lead other family members to do the same. Dario and Fernando each have multiple brothers living in San Francisco, but they themselves would never have considered migrating. Dario explained,

One of my brothers only has one day off. He works in the morning to the afternoon, and then he goes to another restaurant. He works practically all night and doesn't sleep much. In addition to that, they're really far from the family. They can't come home—well, they can, but to come back and then find a job when you return is really hard.

Having to leave your family to take care of them is deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, a person who chooses—on their own or together with their family—to take all the risks associated with migrating may in the end be able to contribute to the material well-being of their family. But on the other hand, moving away from your family to cross the border for years and years also entails the risk of growing apart from the very family you set out to help. Dario, Fernando, and Saul have continually expressed a strong desire to support their family, and their persistent work ethic in school reflects their commitment to achieving that goal in Yucatán. Few students in Yaxhachen have the educational goals and persistence of Dario, Fernando, and Saul.

One student I met, called Juan, was on the opposite end of the spectrum of Dario, Fernando, and Saul. When I met Juan, he was just starting high school with Fernando, and I was starting to get my feet wet as the new scholarship program manager. Juan was from a town called Xkobenhaltun but had attended the *telesecundaria* in Yaxhachen, where he and Fernando were friends. A few days before the first day of school, I accompanied Juan and Fernando to buy school supplies in the *centro* of Oxkutzcab. Later, we ate pizza and watched a movie with past scholarship students, so they could all talk about the upcoming school year and what the new students could expect. I felt confident in the support network of students from Yaxhachen in Oxkutzcab. And in the beginning of the year, Juan and Fernando seemed to be supporting each other in their classes and adjusting well to the new environment. But as the first quarter of the school year ended, Juan started to skip class and stopped turning in his assignments, while Fernando kept up with the pace.

I would talk to Juan and ask him what was going on, and he would respond saying that the classes were difficult or that the teacher didn't explain the subjects well enough. So, after those initial talks, I began to help Juan with his English homework; I talked to his teachers so that they would know he was struggling and to keep an eye out for him; and, Fernando promised that he would help Juan whenever he needed it. Any student from a rural school is going to struggle to keep up with urban students, especially given the Maya/Spanish language gap. However, it seemed like something else was holding him back, because he continued to fall behind and wasn't reaching out for help from the people that could support him. At that point, I had to try to figure out what was going on at home.

As I began to learn more about Juan's personality and his home life, I began to see Juan as an example of how migration could negatively affect a student's educational aspirations. Juan's father, Carlos, migrated to the United States when he was four years old, while his mother stayed behind in Xkobenhaltun to take care of Juan and his little sister. Since then, Carlos has made another life with a new partner and a baby in the United States. Juan's mother, Maria, has now remarried to another man in the town and has had two more children with him. On top of all that, Juan now mostly stays with his paternal grandmother. Although I'm not sure exactly why Juan stays with his grandmother—since all of these family members live within 100 yards or so of each other in Xkobenhaltun— this game of musical chairs with new step-parents, new half brothers and sisters, and new living arrangements undoubtedly affected the stability of Juan's family, who ideally should support him while he's in school.

Despite the changes in his family, Juan is not completely disconnected from his father in the United States. Carlos occasionally calls to talk to his family, and when Juan started studying in Oxnard, he was able to talk to his dad through Facebook. One day, I saw that Juan had commented on a picture of Carlos with a shiny, new Harley Davidson motorcycle, saying "I want mine like that :-)" to which Carlos responded "behave well and you'll see that I'll buy you one." Perhaps that was just a joke, but Carlos does send money (seemingly regularly) to pay for new clothes, satellite television, and other goods in addition to food. One time Juan even showed up to school with a new iPhone [which blows my mind even more in retrospect because later his mother would tell me that they didn't have enough money to buy Juan the medicine he needed when he was sick]. But regardless of the things that Carlos could give Juan, it seems as if he couldn't or wouldn't effectively make sure he got his homework done or to encourage him to try his best in school every week.

So, what's the deal with Juan? Is he a student embattled by family issues caused by migration? I never asked him this question directly, because I had already tried so earnestly to figure out what was going on that I didn't think beating a dead horse would do any good. The closest I got was asking Fernando and Dario what they thought about his situation, seeing as how they had spent a lot of time with him and knew about his family. Fernando dismissed the problems that Juan might have had living without his father, explaining, "Well, [Juan] actually didn't have many problems. He just didn't want to keep studying. He also didn't know how to confront the problems he did have." Dario added that Juan confided in him towards the end of his first year in high school, saying "I'm not going to study, because that's the only way that they will get me out of the

[scholarship] program." When I heard Dario say that, I was completely taken aback, because I had never thought of the possibility that Juan didn't want to be in the program anymore. Since then, I have seen him riding around Yaxhachen on motorcycles with his friends, and he seems happy. Perhaps, despite my previous assessment that migration was at the root of the problem with Juan, the most basic issue seems to be that he simply didn't feel comfortable leaving his town and his family and friends. The effects of migration and a history of marginalization of Maya speakers certainly has a role, but on the individual level, it seems as if students drop out to live in the comfort of their own home.

The transition from being a student in a rural middle school to a more urban high school is stark. When I travel to Yaxhachen from my hometown in Shreveport, Louisiana, I connect in Houston, fly to Cancun, bus across the peninsula to Merida, and then head south through the municipal capitals and small towns of southern Yucatán. By the time I get to Oxkutzcab, the transition from there to Yaxhachen seems relatively gradual. However, Dario emphasized that going to Oxkutzcab is a challenging and transformative experience for students like himself from Yaxhachen, "It's not only a question of knowledge or being driven, because only when you get there and see the reality will you know if you want to keep going or not." No matter how confident a student is when they apply for the scholarship, the transition to living away from the community, living between two worlds, is a challenge that not all students are ready to accept.

Unfortunately, once the student is ready to take the risk to continue studying, he or she will face criticism from their peers, adults, and possibly their parents. Dario and

Fernando said that when they submitted their application to the scholarship program, other students chided them saying, “What are you going to study for? You’ll just wind up back here.” Now that Fernando is in high school, he says that when he comes home to Yaxhachen on the weekends, his friends and fellow classmates from the *telesecundaria* sometimes accuse him of being snobby or presumptuous, as if he’s looking down on them for not continuing to study. Saul’s mother hears criticism from other parents for investing so much in his education. “No matter what you do,” she told him, “some people will criticize you.” I understand that certain students and their parents decided not to continue in school, but it’s hard to fathom why those students would try to deflate the hopes of others. Perhaps the students feel envious of the opportunity, or maybe parents feel as if leaving the family is irresponsible or selfish. Since the new high school has started in the afternoons in Yaxhachen, I’ve heard from the staff that many of the students enrolled seemed to have signed up as a way to get out of chores and work in the *milpa*, at the expense of the parents.

For the students like Fernando, Dario, and Saul who completed high school—all with varying degrees of academic performance—living away from home, meeting new people, exploring new places has been a transformative experience for them which pulls them back to their community, wanting to share what they've learned. Dario daydreamed about creating a *casa de cultura* where he and another friend from Yaxhachen could practice and teach folkloric dances with their peers, and Saul and Fernando have both expressed their desire to become teachers and to help spread literacy to people in their community. I think Dario said it best when he said, "Because of all we've gone through, we have another mentality than we did when we were in middle school. Before, all we

wanted to do was keep studying and get a good job. Now, we see things differently, in addition to that, you can experience a lot of things, have more opportunities, meet more people." The world outside of Yaxhachen can be intimidating, and it is a real act of bravery on the part of each student who attempts to pursue a high school education away from home.

When I began this research, I was essentially concerned with figuring out the reason why Juan and so many other scholarship students were dropping out of high school. After interviewing these students, I realized that the problems and barriers to education are numerous, and that identifying a main problem or set of problems is an unproductive way of thinking in this case, at least. Focusing on figuring out what's wrong with Juan can distract from imagining how the energy and passion of Dario, Fernando, and Saul could be channeled into something positive. They want to share their adventures and experiences with their families and friends, Because, even though they are moving out in the world, they continually think about Yaxhachen and want to help create positive change. In fact, the feeling of responsibility to the family and/or the community seems to be a primary motivation for all types of scholarship students: those who want to stay in Yaxhachen, those who migrate, those who go to high school and drop out, and those who continue on and graduate. In the following two chapters, I want to explore the way that teachers and scholarship program managers like myself tend to value only the dreams of those students who want to leave the community and suggest ways that we as outside actors can help the students who want to go and study as well as those who want to stay achieve their goals.

Chapter 4:

The Teachers of Telesecundaria Ignacio Allende



Figure 2. Photo of teacher at Telesecundaria Ignacio Allende instructing his class

Teachers are never neutral. “Whether the teacher is authoritarian, undisciplined, competent, incompetent, serious, irresponsible, involved, a lover of people and of life, cold, angry with the world, bureaucratic, excessively rational, or whatever else, he/she will not pass through the classroom without leaving his or her mark on the students,” Paulo Freire declares (1999, 64). In this chapter, I introduce the teachers of *Telesecundaria* Ignacio Allende and explore the goals, experiences, and outlook on the job of educating students in Yaxhachen. I begin first by tracing how the role of the teacher in the Mexican education system evolved throughout the 20th century from demanding indigenous assimilation to promoting intercultural education. However, the persistent lack of resources in rural schools shows that the intercultural shift in education has fallen short of its promise of quality education for all students. The political nature of

teacher placement and the importance of standardized tests for professional advancement create further issues by defining teacher success in terms of connections and percentages. This situation is as true elsewhere in México as it is in Yaxhachen. Nevertheless, I find that many of the teachers at Ignacio Allende are genuinely compassionate, empathetic, hardworking people who support and respect the local community. Ultimately, I suggest that the institutional barriers inherent within the *telesecundaria* system constrict but do not eliminate the possibility for teachers to inspire the sort of critical curiosity and commitment to action prescribed by Paulo Freire.

The Age of Assimilation and the Intercultural Turn

Primary and secondary schools run by Catholic priests or municipal governments existed in small numbers across México during the 19th century, but it wasn't until after the Mexican Revolution ended in 1920 that the national education system began to take form. The revolutionary elite surveyed the multitudes of indigenous languages, beliefs, and ways of life across México and considered them threats to the new labor, agricultural, and political systems being put in place. "México became a laboratory of modernity," Adrian Bantjes explains, "where the Enlightenment dream clashed with the alternative visions that stressed local culture and religiosity, autonomy, land, and social justice" (Bantjes 2007, 152). In the years to come, rural schoolhouses across the country became the nexuses through which the indigenous population would be transformed into Mexican citizens.

The Ministry of Public Education (SEP) was founded in 1921 with the goal of turning "Indians," prone to alcoholism, superstition, etc., into "defanaticized" *mestizos* (culturally and racially mixed citizens). This transformation would take place in rural schools called

“action schools” where “learning in principle took place through the cooperative cultivation of gardens and marketing of produces, the raising of animals and bees, and the introduction of modern medicines” (Vaughan 2007, 158). One of the fundamental principles of the education system at this time was Spanish-only instruction. Rafael Ramírez, the SEP director of rural education in 1933, warned teachers in rural schools, “If you speak to [your indigenous students] in their language . . . you will adopt the customs of their ethnic group, later their inferior ways of life, and finally you yourself will become the Indian, that is, one more unit to incorporate (quoted in Lewis 2007, 180). This quote epitomizes the ideology of *indigenismo* dominating political thought at the time: indigenous people can become productive citizens but only if they give up their language and culture.

Starting in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Mexican education system began to change in response to the growing unrest among indigenous people and teachers, in the context of a wider Latin American zeitgeist of indigenous empowerment. In the 1970’s, the Department of Indigenous Education was created as a way of organizing new indigenous education initiatives, including CONAFE, a teacher-training program that recruits cohorts of young indigenous students who would in turn teach other students like themselves in and about their language. Also, in 1994, the Mexican constitution was reformed to include the recognition that México was a pluri-cultural nation of which indigenous peoples and languages are an inextricable part. Most recently, in 2001, the Department of Intercultural and Bilingual Education was formed to embody this new idea that indigenous education should be approached as a way to actively promote the maintenance of indigenous languages and culture in relation to each other and the state. Thus, over the

last half of the 20th century and into the 21st, there has been a liberalizing or opening of public policy with respect to indigenous education when compared to the repressive assimilation of previous years.

Despite the expressed support of intercultural and indigenous education, the education system in México has become based on nationalized curriculum and standardized tests to measure student performance. The contradictory nature of educational policy and the lack of equity created by the current system have prompted academics and activists to demand a process of "decolonizing education" for indigenous communities (Gorski 2008). "The issue is no longer planning for the indigenous populations," Luis Enrique Lopez argues, "but rather with them, and, moreover, arriving at proposals stemming from their own perspectives and viewpoints" (2009). This approach to indigenous education would place control over determining the shape of education from the state and give it to the communities themselves to decide what would be the most appropriate means to improve their conditions.

Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, championed the cause of reclaiming schools for rural or indigenous communities of Latin America. In order to create true freedom and equality, he argued, a school system must transform their hierarchical decision making processes to a more horizontal, collaborative process. If the local community is not deeply involved within the school in setting the goals of the education and the curriculum, then the school will recreate old power dynamics.

Education, Freire asserts, can never be neutral:

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. (Freire 1968, 34)
Creating a truly critical and creative space for the “practice of freedom,” as Friere describes, in the structured, bureaucratic space of a state-run school seems a difficult, perhaps impossible task, and therefore many academics have focused on spaces outside of state control as models for indigenous education programs.

The most commonly cited example of the realization of this ideal is the rebellion of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1994, which resulted in the establishment of autonomous zones in which indigenous communities can control their own education and local government system. One study analyzes the difference between indigenous schools in Morelos and Chiapas, and finds that in Chiapas there is more community participation and the active use of indigenous languages in the classroom than in Morelos where schools are subordinated to the state (Baronnet 2013). Other scholars highlight the use of the internet and global communication strategies by the Zapatistas to raise funds and awareness for creating locally run schools and teacher training programs that support communal goals (Renike 2004, Tinajero and Englander 2012). Indeed, the case of the EZLN rebellion and the establishment of schools in the *caracoles* (autonomous regions) in Chiapas provide an intriguing example of a possible way for marginalized indigenous groups to take control of their lives. However, this example is predicated on the use of violence and the mobilization of an ethnic identity that is simply not possible to translate to all indigenous communities in México.

As we saw in the Chapter 2, there have been no significant recent mobilizations of ethnic identity in Yucatán to make demands of the Mexican government for autonomy like there have been in Chiapas. Moreover, the Yucatec speaking community is

geographically spread out and does not identify uniformly with a singular identity. Thus, it seems that the mobilization under a common Maya identity to take control of the schools is unlikely. What is more likely is that the federal education system will maintain its control over the direction of education, and that teachers, community leaders, and Yucatec speakers will have to find spaces within this established system to achieve their goals.

Telesecundaria Ignacio Allende



Figure 2. Photo of school grounds of Telesecundaria Ignacio Allende

Telesecundarias are distance-learning middle schools in México created to extend secondary education to rural populations. Ignacio Allende is one of 185 *telsecundarias* in the state of Yucatán which has over 13,000 total students enrolled. Ideally, following the *telesecundaria* model, when the students arrive at school at 8 a.m., they would turn on the television in each classroom and view the daily lessons televised by the national

Department of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública* or SEP). At the beginning of each hour, a 15 minute program for each subject (math, science, social studies, etc.) introduces a theme and leaves the class with a question or an activity to do in the remaining 45 minutes of the class. During those 45 minutes, the teacher's task is to assist with the activity and explain further. This combination of pre-designed lessons and teacher-guided practice were envisioned an efficient and engaging classroom experience for the teachers and students.

The *telesecundaria* Ignacio Allende in Yaxhachen was founded in 1992 and now has about 100 students throughout all three grades. When the school in Yaxhachen was just beginning, classes were held in the *comisaria*, a one-room building used for meetings with local officials and community gatherings. But, over the next few years, the town government petitioned the governor for funds, a piece of land was bought, and the process of constructing the *telesecundaria* began. At first, the school was nothing more than a *palapa* (thatched roof, open-air building) on a piece of overgrown land. Lucy, a woman from the first cohort comprised of students to use this new space, remembers being an active participant in preparing the school yard: “for us, during break there was no playing,” she explains, “we would go out and chop weeds and clean the area around the school, and we liked doing it, because we wanted a beautiful school (*una escuela bonita*).” For her, tending this space was about showing the younger students leaving primary school that they could continue studying if they had the desire to do so. Today, the school has six classrooms (two for each grade), an office, concrete playgrounds, and a new *palapa* for outdoor gatherings. All in all, the *telesecundaria* in Yaxhachen boasts considerable infrastructure that other rural schools in México often lack, and the

participation between the community and the faculty seems to have been fundamental to that growth.

Until recently, middle school was the last formal education that students from Yaxhachen would receive, and the goal of the *telesecundaria* was to prepare them for the life ahead, to "learn to live better." The following pages will introduce you to the various teachers and explore their motivations to become educators, the value they place on education, and the way they try to relate that to their students. I also explore the frustrations they have about students and parents from Yaxhachen as well as their concerns about their job and life goals. I argue that the personal values of the teachers and the applied, intercultural mission of the school system create a fertile space for learning, but that the institutional limitations of the school system constrain the opportunities of teachers to really engage with the issues of the community in critical and creative ways.

Meet the Educators



Figure 3. The principal and administrative assistant discuss school matters

On any given school day, the groundskeeper of the school opens the gates to the *Telesecundaria* Ignacio Allende at 7:30 a.m anticipating the arrival of the rest of faculty and staff of Ignacio Allende. The principal and five teachers arrive in two carpools from Oxxkutzcab just an hour away. Some have had to take a bus already to get to the carpool, making their commute even longer. For all of the teachers and faculty at Ignacio Allende, the mornings are early and the days are long. Each teacher is responsible for educating the same group of 15-20 students throughout all three years of middle school, which means that each student has the same teacher for every single day of his or her middle school education. At Ignacio Allende, not one of the instructors uses the televised lessons, because—as I have been told—the signal is inconsistent and the students can't keep up with the speed of the standardized lessons. Instead, they create their own lesson plans with outdated textbooks, trying to relate the fundamentals of every subject in Spanish to their Maya-speaking students. While many teachers appreciate getting to know students on a deeper level, to teach everything about eight subjects for each year of middle school is a daunting task for any one person.

One of my main informants at the school was Principal Gustavo. He's been an educator for 18 years, and has been working as a teacher and finally the principal of Ignacio Allende continuously since 1999. He spoke at length about the advantages and disadvantages of being a part of the *telesecundaria* system, and he defended the model of the *telesecundaria*:

One of main characteristics [of *telesecundarias*] I could say that we have is that we look at all of the subjects (asignaturas) at once. In all other middle schools, they are based in certain hours for certain subjects. So, if you teach Spanish, you go to a class in the first hour and then to another class the next hour, and you're always teaching Spanish. On the other hand, we teach mathematics and then I myself am going to teach Spanish; I teach science; I teach civics; I do everything,

because we have 30 hours assigned. Other teachers only have 10. This is one of the advantages, because you spend the whole day with your students. However, a math teacher only comes in for an hour and then goes to another room, only spending one hour a day with the students. That's insufficient time to know Juanito, Pedrito, and how they are in each subject. It's one of the advantages we have, because we teach all of the subjects.

Indeed, the *telesecundaria* model offers teachers an opportunity to get really close to their students, to know them more deeply over time. Even though this requires each teacher to be responsible for every subject, Gustavo argues that the close relationship between students and teacher can make up for weaknesses in particular subjects. He explains, "My specialty is math, in Spanish I'm not very good. I'm not a big reader. Mathematics is sort of lazy, it's concise. If my specialty is not Spanish, sometimes I learn with the kids. While I'm teaching, I'm learning with them." This process of learning with others, he says, started with helping his peers with math in middle school and high school and now continues in his role as principal, as he manages the teachers assigned to work at Ignacio Allende.

Socio Economic Backgrounds

The teachers of Ignacio Allende come from various socio-economic backgrounds, and they all have different motivations for becoming teachers. All the teachers I interviewed generally responded that they enjoyed working with children, but it's clear that for each of them, choosing to become a teacher was fundamentally a career choice. Of the six teachers, most of them had studied another subject or had worked in another field before becoming a teacher. Rosalia, a teacher in her second year at Ignacio Allende, admitted that if she had not gotten a scholarship, she would not have been able to continue studying after high school:

I came from a humble (*humilde*) family with seven brothers and sisters. It was really difficult to finance a degree like that. So, my intention was to continue studying, and CONAFE gave me the scholarship. The scholarship was for three years, and I completed my studies in that time. Unfortunately, when I finished school there wasn't an opening for preschool so I started teaching in middle upper (*medio superior*) education.

While Rosalia came from a humble family in a rural town and entered into teaching through a scholarship program, Lazaro, a teacher in his fifth year at Ignacio Allende, came from relatively well-off family and entered into teaching after being a politician in Oxxutzcab. Lazaro said that campaigning was what made him want to become a teacher, "Seeing the necessities of the communities, I spent a lot of time in politics with my father, and there I became a person (*me nacio como una persona*) who wanted to help people. So, that's why I became a teacher, to transmit a little bit of knowledge to the children."

Being a teacher is a pretty good job in México. It's a consistent and relatively well-paid position compared to the other options of manual labor and service industry jobs available in Oxxutzcab. Most of all, job security is guaranteed once a teacher earns their *base* or tenure. All new teachers are hired under temporary contracts and must work to be awarded raises or *base*. Gustavo admitted that some teachers in the *telesecundaria* system seem to be there simply for a paycheck, not to invest their time and energy into really trying to connect with the students. "Like anything in life," Gustavo philosophized, "there is the good and the bad. There are some [teachers] who half want to [teach], some that do it well, others that don't want to do it." Of course, in any profession there are people who are good at their job and those who don't have great work ethics or persistence. However, one of the most difficult aspects of being a principal at a *telesecundaria* is the fact that once a teacher gets awarded *base* you can't simply fire them. "The system that we have doesn't allow us to pressure them into completing their

job," Gustavo explains, "It's very complicated to become a teacher in a telesecundaria, because there is a lot of demand. So, you take an entrance exam, but this famous exam isn't real. The people who deserve the job don't win, because politics are involved. There are recommendations. If you have a good *padrino* [godfather], they give you the job regardless of whether you are capable of doing it."

Lazaro, the politician come teacher, represents a good example of how the merit pay system can be detrimental to a school. During the four weeks that I spent in the school, Lazaro was absent more than any other teacher. Gustavo expressed his frustration, because every time Lazaro doesn't come to school, Gustavo has to send the kids from his class back home. In the past, Gustavo says that concerned parents have complained that they wanted their children moved out of Lazaro's class, because they weren't accomplishing anything. However, Lazaro has his *base* and couldn't be fired, even for missing so many days of class. I expect that no teacher would ever admit that they themselves are the guilty of this—Lazaro certainly didn't— but many teachers mentioned that other instructors would simply pass kids along from grade to grade regardless of whether they had actually learned the material.

“*Faltistas*” (teachers who rarely show up for work) and teachers still cashing paychecks after they have died have recently sparked controversy over the allegedly corrupt school system. In response, new education reforms passed under President Peña Nieto will develop a new standardized system for assessing teacher performance. But many teachers around the country are concerned about the political nature of teacher advancement and the fairness of a standardized system for teachers in diverse learning environments throughout the country.

Living in Maya, Learning in Spanish

Ignacio Allende is different from *telesecundarias* in less rural areas, because all of the students in the school and their parents speak Yucatec Maya as their first language. Whether the students are out playing in the schoolyard or chatting before class, they are constantly communicating in Maya with their peers. One teacher in his first year at Ignacio Allende noted that in other communities he worked in, students were embarrassed to speak Maya in the school, but the students from Yaxhachen feel most comfortable speaking Maya to their friends. Many of the students that I met seemed very proud of the Maya language, teaching me phrases and using it playfully as a secret language in front of unknowing teachers. This language gap between the Maya-speaking children and the mostly Spanish-speaking faculty and staff of Ignacio Allende is one of the main obstacles that teachers face when they come to work in Yaxhachen.

Many of the teachers have had some exposure to Maya, through their grandparents or possibly their parents, but none of them speak Maya as their first language. One teacher told me that even though all of his family speaks Maya, he never learned to speak Maya himself:

All of my family speaks Maya, they talk to each other in Maya. But they don't speak to me in Maya. When my mom speaks to me, she talks to me in Spanish. My brothers and sisters speak to me in Spanish. But when my mom speaks to my siblings she speaks in Maya. Why do they do that? I guess because of custom (*costumbre*). I was the last and the smallest, and they didn't teach me. Till this day I have never asked them why.

Although I didn't ask further why his family avoided teaching him Maya, many Maya-speaking parents in bigger towns and cities in Yucatán will raise their children as monolingual Spanish speakers in order to improve their opportunities for employment. On top of this economic motivation, many Maya speakers feel ashamed to speak Maya or mixed

Spanish and Maya, because speaking an indigenous language is associated with being a backward, country bumpkin.

Now that these teachers are working in a Maya speaking community, many of them mine their limited knowledge of the language in order to facilitate learning. Gustavo grew up among a family of Maya speakers, but didn't learn to speak the language until he started practicing daily as a *telesecundaria* teacher. Often times, when a teacher asks a question in Spanish, the students will be shy or embarrassed to answer in Spanish, because they fear they will pronounce the words wrong and other students will laugh at them. One teacher explained, "They say the ideas they have are better in Maya. Sometimes they can't say it in the official language, only in the maternal language." Another teacher who grew up with Maya-speaking grandparents says that her students were surprised to learn that she could understand Maya: "When I got here [to Ignacio Allende], the students were really surprised because they would ask me questions [in Maya] and I would answer them in Spanish. They would get so surprised and say 'The teacher does understand!'" Because she can understand Maya, she will often allow her students to participate in Maya. However, taking that understanding and responding in Spanish in a way that the students can understand is still a significant challenge for her.

Despite the obvious fact that students learn better in Maya, all of the teachers maintain that teaching the students to express themselves in Spanish is one of their main objectives. That reasoning is based on their own experiences living and working outside of Maya-speaking towns as well as the national education system's model for bilingual education. Students are taught in Maya and Spanish until they reach the third grade, when they are expected to transition into Spanish-only instruction. Although using Maya in the

classroom after third grade is not prohibited, many teachers feel it is their duty to make sure that students know how to speak Spanish. One teacher (who did not grow up in a Maya speaking household) explained the situation like this:

If you are a Maya-speaking teacher, and your students speak Maya, then, yes, it will be much easier to teach them in Maya. But, you would be forgetting to transmit to them the Spanish language. And when the time comes, they will not be able to speak Spanish. Sometimes, I will explain in Spanish, and I will ask one of the students who understood me to come to the board and explain it to their friend in Maya. That is effective sometimes, but if you do it like that, you will go very slowly and you'll fall behind.

The argument here seems to be: if you teach a child geometry, poetry, or anything in their maternal language, sure, they will learn more quickly, however they won't be able to perform better on standardized tests or be able to go out of the community and get a job without knowing Spanish. This Spanish-first approach to education is a far cry from the post-Revolutionary idea that indigenous languages were connected to the condition of poverty and superstition of the people. However, the emphasis on Spanish-only education seems to work in direct contradiction to teachers' experiences. If students learn and express themselves better in Maya, it seems clear that at least a bilingual classroom would be appropriate.

You can lead a student to class, but you can't make him study

The Maya-Spanish language barrier is certainly an obstacle to effective communication, but the differing worldviews of the students and parents from Yaxhachen and the teachers from outside of the community create another barrier between them, even when the messages are clearly understood. As I just mentioned, the teachers at Ignacio Allende see themselves as working to prepare their students for the working world by teaching them Spanish, math, reading, science, etc. In order to make it in the

business world, they contend, a good education is going to be crucial to your success. However, this assumption of the importance of formal education is not a universal opinion.

Each year when the scholarship program would solicit applications from students at Ignacio Allende, the teachers would have to convince students that continuing their education was important and worthwhile. Now, even with an incipient high school program in Yaxhachen, teachers are finding it difficult to convince students to enroll in the new program. During class, teachers report that the majority of their students dedicate their time to relaxing or playing around with friends. "I have 24 students, and I think half of them come because they want to," one teacher said, "The other half don't have any aspirations to finish high school or get a degree." Parents also show disinterest by infrequently attending parent meetings, and some teachers suspect they only send their children to school in order to collect a check from *Oportunidades*, a government welfare program which requires that school-age children regularly attend class.

Teachers say they want to make school relevant (*atterizar*) for the students, because they recognize that students will not understand unless you try to connect it to their own lives. One teacher says that he emphasizes the basic importance of education and hardwork to his class by telling them of how he grew up with few resources and managed to provide for himself:

I use a lot of life experiences, because life experiences get their attention. That house that you see *de paja* [made of thatch and pole], that house that doesn't have a floor, that was what my house was like, and I'm not ashamed to say it. We didn't have money, but we had food which was the most important thing. There by my house there was a lot (*terreno*) with mango, orange, mamey, avocado, vegetables planted by my father. There was no money but there was food. You wake up and say, "I want a mamey", you pick a mamey, and you're eating. There was no money but there was food. He had turkeys and chickens. On Sunday, sometimes

we would kill one and cook it with mango juice. Now, thanks to all of those fruits, we would sell them and I would buy my books, notebooks, and uniforms, and I was able to get ahead (*salir adelante*).

He's suggesting here that if you (the student) work hard and use the resources you have available to you, you can become a lawyer, doctor, or a hydro engineer and then come back to help your family and community. If you choose to stay, he says, you could use the math you learn to plant more efficiently and yield ore crops. The teacher who made these remarks is one of the most empathetic people I met at Ignacio Allende, and teachers like him have been able to encourage students like Dario, Fernando, and Saul (whom you met in chapter 2) to continue studying. However, the roadmap to success that the teachers present to the students usually leads out of the community on an uncertain, risky path, which many middle school students are not ready to choose.

"Learning to Live Better"

In the spring of 2014, the Secretaria de Educacion Publica de Yucatán (Department of Public Education in Yucatán) commemorated the 25th anniversary of the inception of the state-wide telesecundaria program. Across the state, groups of students and faculty from each telesecundaria gathered in a central location, depending on the administrative zone to which the schools belonged, to celebrate the teaching and learning that the telesecundaria offers. The theme of the day was “aprender para vivir mejor” or “learn to live better.” Following this theme, each school was to prepare a science project geared towards generating practical knowledge as well as a cultural performance such as a dance, skit, or song. The result was a day-long event that embodied the ideals associated with the telesecundaria system by teachers and administrators.

On the day of the celebration, hundreds of students and faculty members arrived in caravans from their respective towns, and converged on the indoor basketball stadium in Tekax, Yucatán. The first event of the day was a science fair presenting the results of the various projects endeavored by each school in tables lining the basketball court. The project from Ignacio Allende in Yaxhachen, was an imaginary soap and lotion business called “Yaxha-clean” created by third-year students and their teacher, Maria. In the weeks leading up to the event, Maria and her class attempted to perfect the recipes for their soap and lotion through trial and error, distributing samples and soliciting advice from any would-be guinea pigs. In addition, Maria created pamphlets to promote the startup, and students practiced explaining the process of creating the products and marketing the business to an audience. Several other groups developed projects of a similar nature, including an herbology project which demonstrated the medicinal and nutritional value of local plants and a candle-making experiment using household items. Other groups focused on using simple machines to accomplish tasks, including a project demonstrating the power of pulleys and a styrofoam bridge designed to raise and lower using simple hydraulics.

After a brief break, the cultural performances began and lasted the majority of the day. These performances included a variety of different dances, songs, and sketches. The dances showcased the typical clothing and steps from different indigenous traditions. One group had prepared an elaborate dance routine including an “ancient Maya” ritual burial of a queen and a depiction of the Mesoamerican ball game. Other groups performed dances rooted in colonial and post-colonial Yucatecan traditions like the *jarana* dance and the dance of the ribbons. The students from Ignacio Allende performed a dance from

Guerrero in which the girls twirled in long, golden skirts and the boys acted as would-be suitors to the “amarillas” (the yellow girls). Other groups performed songs and sketches employed a mixture of Spanish and Yucatec lyrics and scripts comedically addressing issues like love, teenage pregnancy, and robbery.

The sum of these various science projects and cultural performances demonstrated the intercultural and bilingual mission of the telesecundaria and expressed the commitment of teachers and faculty to showing students how to improve their situations through education. However, these performances were initiated by teachers in order to ensure that their school was represented well in front of all of the regional administrators. The result was that many of the science projects—the examples of how to “learn to live better”—had dubious applicability to the real lives of the students, because they were dreamt up in the minds of the teachers from outside the communities. When I visited Maria’s classroom before the celebration, the students were largely indifferent to the project, although they appreciated the break from normal class work. It is significant to note that teachers worked very hard to imagine these projects that might help students understand the possibilities around them and that these sorts of initiatives were supported the telesecundaria administrators.

I argue that the issue of student disinterest in education is based in this disconnect between what teachers dream up and what the students themselves are interested in. These are institutional problems within the school that we can trace back to the post-Revolutionary education system. The “action schools” of the 20th century also focused on teaching students how to apply education to practical matters. At that time, teachers were trying to generate interest in new or novel agricultural practices that could support local

people, but the Spanish-only instruction and assimilationist message of the teachers limited the ability of the teachers to engage with local people. Spanish-only instruction is still the law of the land, and the emphasis now is on channeling students into jobs outside of the community. Thankfully, indigenous languages like Yucatec Maya are welcome in the playgrounds and to some extent in the classrooms. However, teachers today still exhibit a similar certainty that what the education system offers is the absolute right way to improve the quality of life in these towns. If teachers are to cultivate genuine interest in education, they must continue to create more room for the Maya language in the classroom and inspire more critical and curious reflection on the issues of their community. In that way, the students could feel more empowered to act on their own terms.

Chapter 5:

Kaxil Kiuic Biocultural Reserve

In 2001, Millsaps College bought up 4,500 acres of land surrounding Yaxhachen. The property had previously been a cattle ranch, named Rancho Kiuic, owned by a single family who lived on the property. When the patriarch of the family died, the land was split up evenly among his 7 children. Over time, the individual heirs began to sell the timber from the land. Dr. Tomás Gallareta Negrón, an archaeologist for the National Institute for Archaeology and History (INAH), got wind that the Canuls were selling timber, and he saw an opportunity. Dr. Gallareta contacted Dr. George Bey and Dr. William Ringle (two of his colleagues from Tulane and fellow Maya archaeologists) with the idea to purchase the land from the Canuls to establish Kaxil Kiuic, an “off the grid” center for learning and eco-tourism.

The continuing mission of the reserve was to preserve "the environment and cultural heritage of the Maya by promoting knowledge through educational programs centered at Helen Moyers Biocultural Reserve" (www.kaxilkiuic.org).¹ This chapter explores how Kaxil Kiuic interfaces with Yaxhachen through their main community outreach program, the Millsaps Scholarship Program for Rural Youth of Yucatán. I show that similar bioreserves in the Yucatán peninsula have struggled to involve local people meaningfully in conservation efforts and community development. The exclusionary

¹ To clarify, Kaxil Kiuic is the name of the non-profit registered in Mexico that manages the Helen Moyers Biocultural Reserve, referring to the 4,500 acres of land. Kiuic refers to the ancient Maya city whose ruins are within the boundaries of Kaxil Kiuic.

selection process and the lack of scholarship manager development in MSPRY present similar barriers to effective participation. Ultimately, I argue that a more flexible, community-based project could create a space to cultivate more meaningful dialogue, participation and action with the resources available.

Bioreserve History and Context

The creation of Kaxil Kiuic is part of a recent history of the declaration of private and public lands as areas of conservation. In the 1970's México began instituting protected areas or bioreserves across the country in areas they deemed to be in danger. The creation of these bioreserves came about from a global discourse on the need for conservation efforts, which was then promoted by national governments and international non-governmental organizations. Bioreserves or “biocultural” reserves like Kaxil Kiuic have been critiqued as neocolonial institutions, because they claim vast areas of land and place very strict rules on its use, often times at the expense of autochthonous people and practices [make this more exact, add references]. In fact, those people are expected to be partners in ecological conservation without having a leadership role in the decision making process. This relationship creates a power disparity between the NGO’s and state agencies with the funds and capability to give permits on the one hand and local people whose livelihood depends on making a living from the resources available to them.

On the other side of the Yucatán peninsula in Quintana Roo, communities bordering the Sian Ka’an Bioreserve directly experienced the precarious development practices on behalf of international NGO’s that sought to “integrate indigenous groups in western style conservation” (Martinez-Reyes 2014, 162). One of those communities, Tres Reyes, participated in various conservation development projects, including one that provided

permits for locals to sell certain numbers of parrots if the community tracked and recorded the population of parrots according to field biology standards. A local leader of Tres Reyes expressed his dissatisfaction with the project,

We request the permits [to sell parrots] and wait... and wait... In the meantime, we are running out of corn, then we have to go out on the street to try to buy some corn, or cooking oil, or whatever we need. They receive their salary every two weeks without delays. Why don't we switch places? They work in the forest and I will do their job, put on a tie, drive a car. Then let's see how we are doing within a month, them working on the *milpa* and me getting my check. (Martinez-Reyes 2014, 168)

This type of conservation first, community second development practice is unable to provide the sustainable support that people need if their access to natural resources is restricted. In this case, the hierarchical and unstable nature of the development programs was at the heart of the inequality between the outside agencies and the local population. In the following pages, I reflect on the high school scholarship program of Kaxil Kiuic in this context, and I find that barriers exist between the people and the program that inhibit local participation and decision making.

Millsaps Scholarship Program for Rural Youth of Yucatán,

In 2005, a group of donors from Millsaps drove down from Merida to visit Kiuic. After touring the ruins and eating a delicious meal in the dining hall at the reserve, they drove past Yaxhachen to learn what life was like for the people there. A married couple saw the children on the streets of Yaxhachen, and they were shocked to learn that most of them did not have the opportunity to study high school in their town. After that experience, they offered to fund scholarships for students who wanted to continue studying, and thus the Millsaps Scholarship Program for Rural Youth of Yucatán (MSPRY) was formed. In 2006, the first two yearly scholarship recipients were selected

by the director of the reserve, James Callaghan, and were sent off to school in Oxkutzcab in the fall. Just about every year for the next six years, one student would continue on to graduate and the other would drop out of school and return to Yaxhachen. The year that I managed the program, both students I selected to receive the scholarship dropped out before having completed their first year. In the following paragraphs, I explain how scholarship program managers like myself selected students, and I argue that the selection process we developed was not as objective or useful as we had imagined.

When the scholarship program first began, there was no systematic way of choosing which student would get a scholarship over another. At that time, personal connections with Kiuic were sometimes all it took for a student to receive a scholarship. Over the course of the program, MSPRY developed a sort of standardized way of selecting the scholarships, based on a series of interviews, recommendations, and a practice test. This process was intended to create a more objective process whereby students could be evaluated on the same criteria. During the second half of the school year, the scholarship program manager would visit the *telesecundaria* in Yaxhachen and announce that the scholarship would be available for two students. I, like my predecessors, explained the process to them: (1) write a letter about why you to continue studying, (2) participate in a personal interview with the scholarship manager about your goals, (3) take a practice high school entrance exam , (4) receive a recommendation and cumulative GPA from your teacher, and (5) participate in an interview with your parents.

From the very start of the selection process, I could see that what we were asking of the students was somehow out of tune with the lives of the students. The prompt for the personal letter asked, “Why do you want to continue studying, and why is education

important to you?” Each of the six letters written that year had the same sort of formal letter format, starting with a “Dear sir” and having formal bodies. Many of them also included similar rhetoric like “Quiero seguir estudiando para seguir adelante y ayudar a mi familia,” or “I want to continue studying in order to move forward and help my family.” Also, they all said something about studying “computación” and one student said he wanted to study “the most advanced technologies there are.” Students learn how to write formal letters in Spanish in class, and it is certain that many of them desired to someday help their families by getting a good job. But, the continual mention of wanting to study computers and the similar format of the letters made it seem as if they had all collaborated or as if the same teacher had helped them all with writing their letters. Many of the students knew Dario, whom you met in Chapter 3, and they knew he had started working with computers when he moved to Oxkutzcab. Perhaps they had heard about what he studied and were intrigued as well. Regardless of whether they came up with the goal of studying computers on their own or if they were influenced by someone else to write that, it seemed as if they were trying to write what they expected we wanted to hear, not what they honestly thought about their future.

In the next step of the selection process, I individually interviewed the six students to ask them further about what they wrote in their essays. The first student I interviewed was named Roberto. He was confident, knew a little bit about computers, and he gave the longest interview of all the applicants. Unlike many of the other students who were more timid, Roberto seemed to always have something else to say, and he was very personable. He told me about his dad in the US, and he asked about me and what I was doing, and was very friendly. He made a really good impression on me as a person with

self-confidence who seemed to have a clear vision for what he wanted. After the interviews were done, I considered Roberto to be a frontrunner for the scholarship. Throughout the rest of the selection process, Roberto and I would talk and make jokes in the school yard, and because I was so friendly, he thought that he was a lock for the scholarship. In the end, when I chose two other students instead of him, he was obviously very hurt. He told his friends that the decision was unfair, and he wouldn't talk to me anymore.

The third part of the selection process was a standardized test composed of a variety of different questions from the state high school entrance exam, including math, science, social studies, geography, reading, Spanish, etc. The applicants were called out during their class, and we placed desks in the palapa outside for each of them. They took the test for an hour or two, and from their body language, it seemed like one of those tests where you know immediately that you bombed it. The average "good" response rates were around 40%. No one scored over 50%. I suppose the test was flawed because it rated their knowledge in a way that didn't portray their actual intelligence relative to one another. Also, the questions were picked by myself to create a short test from full-length version. So, the grades of the tests depended on whether or not the students happened to know that particular answer, not a more comprehensive assessment of fluency in each subject. Despite these shortcomings, it was necessary to have some quantifiable way to distinguish one student from the other, because all of the other components were purely qualitative. I knew that reasoning, but the students didn't. They sat there, pouring over the questions that I picked and stressing about how these answers were going to determine who would receive the scholarship.

After the exams were over, I sat down with the teachers to get their opinions on the students' ability to be successful in high school in Oxkutzcab. First, they gave me the grade point averages. I had to weight these GPAs relative to the highest GPA in each class, because one teacher had much higher grades and the other teacher had lower ones on the whole (the teacher with the higher grades was Lazaro, whom you met in Chapter 4). By weighting these grades in relation to their classmates, I hoped to even out the differences between the classes. Next, I asked the teacher what they thought of this student. Was he or she a hard worker? Does he or she come to class often? Complete homework? And they would tell me sometimes that someone was a little bit lazy but very smart or that this one was a hard worker but struggles in X subject. What they told me about Enrique, whom I ended up picking, was that he had been in and out of school, because he didn't have enough money. He was a little behind, but he was really hard working now, and was turning in all of his homework as well as being sociable. So it seemed as if he was both willing and able to make it in high school in Oxkutzcab. These interviews were on the whole positive. If the student had applied to continue studying, the teachers tried to give a good review of the student and spin their criticisms into more positive qualities.

The next step was perhaps the most important, interviewing the parents of the students. The support of the family is so crucial, because the parents and siblings greatly influence the actions of the student at home and at school. In the afternoon, the students took me to their houses, and I asked the mother, the father, and whoever else was around what they thought about education and if they wanted their child/brother/sister to keep studying. Elio had the most successful familial interview, among the group. He was

happy to have me in his house, and his mother and father were welcoming. They were genuinely concerned about the program, full of questions, and as the interview wore on, more and more of the family members came into the room and joined in on the conversation (his older brother for one, who helped translate some of my questions into Maya). That experience of sitting on adjacent hammocks with all of his family surrounding who were saying the scholarship was such a great opportunity made me believe that he had a very strong support network at home. On the other hand, at another student's house, the reaction was quite the opposite. First of all his mom seemed uninterested in speaking to me from the onset. His dad was there, but he was busy and didn't make himself available to me. The interview was honestly so awkward that I cut it short, leaving after about 20 minutes of talking. Even if that student had stellar grades and recommendations, it would have been difficult to choose him, because of the cold environment I perceived at his home.

After each part of the process was over, I quantified each students' performance and put it into a spreadsheet. With all the students' results next to the other, I calculated who had the two highest scores, and those are the ones that I chose. After becoming friends with Roberto, I think he assumed that he was a lock, but his GPA was artificially inflated from being in Lazaro's class, and his test scores were not as high as others. In addition to all of that, he told me one day that he wanted to migrate to the United States after graduating high school, which sounded an alarm in my mind. The objective of the scholarship program, as I saw it, was to help students create a life for themselves in Yucatán. All of the factors were compiled, and it all boiled down to that I couldn't pick him. The only female applicant scored fifth out of the six overall, but she was a diligent

worker. I also considered boosting her to select a boy and a girl, considering the gender inequality in Yaxhachen, and the fact that many girls aren't allowed by their parents to study. But I didn't. I chose to have some faith that the two "top students" according to the numbers had a better chance in succeeding in high school. Neither of them did.

The next year I came back, and I saw all of the people that I had denied scholarships. They had all entered into the new high school in Yaxhachen, temporarily holding classes in the middle school. I was embarrassed to see them. Even though this new high school was being made available to them now, I couldn't help but feel that I had made the wrong choice and cut short someone's opportunity to go to a better school with more resources. Looking back, I recognize there was no obvious choice, and that all of these students' outcomes could have been the same. Maybe once they had gotten to the high school, they would have all realized that they preferred to be in Yaxhachen with their friends, regardless of the difference in resources. In the two years since I left the scholarship program, all of the students selected for a scholarship have dropped out. If the government had not created the high school in Yaxhachen, we might still be trying to figure out the formula for picking the "best" students. Now Kaxil Kiuic's hand is virtually forced to come up with a new project and phase out the scholarship program, and this is an exciting opportunity from my perspective. How much more impact could we create if we stop telling the majority of students "No" and start facilitating dialogue and action among them in their own town? I think the answer to that question can only be found by listening to the students and responding to what they say when they are expressing themselves most freely, not when they are trying to fit into a mold to win a scholarship.

Institutional Memory

One of the main issues with the selection process was that the scholarship coordinators like myself did not have the background knowledge that was really necessary to make well informed judgments about students from Yaxhachen. A few years into the scholarship program, Dr. George Bey and James Callaghan decided that it would be a good idea to involve Millsaps students with the project. Initially, they were brought on as summer interns who would help mentor and tutor the scholarship students during the summer. Eventually, that evolved into a permanent position for a recent Millsaps graduate to run the program during the school year. One of the initial summer scholarship interns, Jena Feindel, was chosen to be the first manager of the scholarship program and ran it for two consecutive years from 2009 to 2011. She was followed by another Millsaps graduate, Brittany Tourelle, the next year (2011-2012), and then finally I arrived for the school year of 2012-2013. The position was a dream for recently graduated students like myself: I got the opportunity to live abroad for a year and strengthen my graduate school application with a unique experience. I was excited to spend a year working with the scholarship students too, but I almost didn't get the opportunity due to lack of student interest.

At the end of Jena's second year managing the scholarship program, she was struggling to find students who both wanted to continue studying and whose parents would allow them to be in the program. She became frustrated, because it seemed as if no one in the community really wanted to go to high school for some inexplicable reason. The next year, Brittany began to investigate why the scholarship program was failing and what could possibly be more beneficial for the people of the town. Essentially, the

responses she received from people in the community indicated that parents were critical of Jena, because she was a cigarette smoker and allegedly drank alcohol in Yaxhachen. In a small town like Yaxhachen rumors spread and become facts quickly and allegations of impropriety can be damning. Given this information, Brittany concluded that it would be worthwhile to continue the program at least one more year, hoping that new management would translate into renewed interest among the students and parents of Yaxhachen.

Brittany succeeded in recruiting Juan and Fernando, whom you met in Chapter 3, and everyone involved with the scholarship program breathed a sigh of relief. When I came into the program, the assumption was that the program was not broken, and that what we needed to do was keep up a better public image in order to continue recruiting more students for the scholarship program. However, eventually Juan dropped out of the program, followed by the two students I selected and the students selected the next year as well. At that point, it seemed clear that the problem with the scholarship program was not simply individual scholarship students or program managers. I argued in chapters two and three that family obligations and different school atmospheres contribute to many students' decisions not to continue studying. In addition to those factors, I believe that the design of the scholarship program inhibited a smooth transition for students from Yaxhachen to Oxkutzcab.

In retrospect, I perceive institutional memory and training as two key areas for improving the scholarship program. From the beginning of the program, institutional memory has been limited. Few documents about the first years of the program are available apart from budgets. Once Brittany took over, she began to produce more regular reports about her findings in the community among the parents, and I continued to

provide bimonthly reports of students' progress during my tenure. Most of the records about the program that I created were internal documents detailing the cost of sending students to high school, if they were passing or failing, and what I had been doing. These sorts of reports are good for explaining where the funds are being spent and how individual students are doing in school, but the variety and inconsistency of the reports throughout the years makes it difficult to evaluate the level of impact the program may have over time.

The lack of institutional memory also constrained the development of the scholarship manager's role within the program. Many students including myself used the scholarship program position as a stopgap between college and graduate school. So, in order to accommodate those schedules, training for rising scholarship managers was held during the summer. The new and outgoing scholarship managers would work on the six-week archaeological project at Kaxil Kiuic during the day, and in the afternoon they would go around in Yaxhachen and Oxkutzcab meeting all the relevant people, asking questions, and studiously taking notes. The main objectives of the training were generally: to show the new manager how to use public transportation, organize housing for students, select and enroll new students, and other similar administrative tasks. No matter how comprehensive the training, each scholarship manager faced a significant learning curve as they began to master Spanish and manage relationships with students, parents, and school staff. The oral and subjective nature of the training made it difficult to refine the process over time, and the focus on administrative aspects of the program limited our ability to develop the scholarship managers into effective mentors.

If the tone of this chapter may seem negative, it sounds that way because I am writing from the vantage point that so much more can be done. Having nine students graduate high school because of our efforts is something to be proud of. In addition to those graduates, the original donors, Dr. Geroge Bey, James Callaghan, and all of the scholarship managers have put countless hours and resources into the project over the years, and their contributions are valuable. We should not be discouraged that we have not lifted the weight of poverty from Yaxhachen in the few years we have been working, and we should not be disheartened that many students decided to drop out of the program. For everyone involved, the scholarship program has been a learning experience. What is it like to live somewhere else and work with people different from yourself? What does it take to “*seguir adelante*” (get ahead)? How can we make better use of our energy and potential together to work towards that goal? The answer to these questions is still unclear, but at the very least, we are beginning to create a dialogue. In the next chapter, I argue that by channeling the resources of the scholarship program into activities that address those questions and facilitate meaningful action in response, Kaxil Kiuic can start to create the sort of development project that can strengthen local people and their ways of life.

Chapter 6:

Discussion & Conclusion

How do we move forward? Students say, “Quiero seguir adelante” or “I want to move forward” when they explain why they want to continue studying. The teachers say that their goal is to help students move forward to better job opportunities and higher standards of living. And the people of Kaxil Kiuic wonder how to move forward with community development in the face of waning interest in the scholarship program and the opening of a high school in Yaxhachen.

Throughout each of the previous chapters, I’ve tried to tease out how each of these stakeholders defines “forward” from different perspectives. For students of Yaxhachen, moving forward may mean risking migration to the United States, continuing on to higher education, or simply staying put and making a life in Yaxhachen. Teachers want to move forward in their careers by preparing their students to perform better on standardized tests and encouraging them to continue their path through formal education. Kaxil Kiuic wants to continue to strengthen their community development as a way to create further consensus about the importance of ecological and cultural conservation. Ultimately, the education system and Kaxil Kiuic have the most influence over the opportunities that students have to better themselves, because those institutions hold the social and economic capital that determine which visions of “forward” are respected and funded. This power dynamic causes the school system and the scholarship program to lose traction with students and families from Yaxhachen.

While writing this thesis, I have also been participating in a project called Ko'ox Boon. Ko'ox Boon means "let's paint" in Yucatec Maya, and it was founded initially by my colleague Amanda Strickland in the summer of 2014. During the first summer, Allie Jordan, another Millsaps graduate, and I joined Ko'ox Boon and facilitated the painting of two murals in the plaza of Yaxhachen, designed by two local artists and painted by droves of enthusiastic children. Since that summer, Ko'ox Boon has gained a critical mass of support from over 50 volunteers and board members from Millsaps College and México. We raised over \$10,000 to pay for the second summer of the camp and the renovation of an unused public building to serve as a *casa de cultura* (center for culture). During the second summer of the camp, volunteers from Millsaps and México facilitated art workshops, games, and lessons about healthy eating for children and young adults alike. We hoped that this program could be the answer to promote critical and creative thinking among those who attend the camp by encouraging to reflect on their *pueblo* and creating spaces for them to act upon and transform it according to their vision.

The results of the second summer camp were simple yet amazing. Over one hundred children participated in our activities throughout the summer. We painted more murals; we built a community garden; we planted trees; we performed puppet shows; we made music. Most importantly, we engaged the community as a whole. The base of operations, the *casa de cultura*, was a building loaned to us by the *ejido*, the communal land management group of the town. The men of the *ejido*—almost two hundred men in total—offered to come and clean the brush growing up around the *casa de cultura*, and they showed up in full force. After the work was done many of them stayed around for

refreshments and conversation. I spoke with the *ejiditarios* and they thanked me and my team for doing what we do—for making their children happy.

For the closing ceremony of the camp, mothers, fathers, and other relatives showed up *en masse* to celebrate what the children had been doing for six weeks. It was such a happy occasion, but no one was more sad than Doña Wilma, a grandmother who brought her two granddaughters to Ko'ox Boon almost every single day. She even began to bring her own crafts to do with little children during camp, like weaving honeycombs out of strips of long banana leaves (a craft she was taught by her own mother). As the camp came to a close, Doña Wilma told me that she would cry and be very sad when there was no more "Boon." The engagement of so many adults from the community is the most amazing result of the second Ko'ox Boon summer camp. We created a project in which they felt free to participate and take ownership of.

The high school scholarship program discussed in this thesis never garnered such popular support in the community. As my interviews showed, scholarship students felt like members of the community were against them going to high school, as if those students presumed they were better than the rest that stayed in Yaxhachen to work in the fields and at home. Moreover, the scholarship program was a competition. Only two students per year "won" a high school scholarship. These factors contributed to making the scholarship program a source of division among families and the community.

A summer art camp cannot be the end-all-be-all solution to the challenges that a community like Yaxhachen faces. However, Ko'ox Boon did generate interest from the community and engaged them in a way that empowered them to make visible, tangible changes to their community, if only in paint on walls and smiles on faces. The question

that presents itself now is how to create a project that both engages a community on equal terms and affects macro-level changes in poverty, health, or education as well. Instead of a scholarship program that creates winners and losers, an educational development project should engage entire communities and empower people of the community to use education as a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. This is what Paulo Freire's concepts of praxis and critical pedagogy aim to accomplish: creating a spark of inquiry into one's own life and developing the tools to shape it according to his or her own needs.

This thesis has been a first step in identifying these underlying issues with the scholarship program and the Mexican education system with respect to indigenous students. Further research in the vein of social entrepreneurship and innovation will be necessary in order to identify existing education development models that engage communities as a whole. The emerging fields of social entrepreneurship and innovation will also address the practical concerns of how to implement such a project, how to adapt it to another environment like Yaxhachen, and how to set measurable goals for success. This is how we move forward: we develop questions and seeks answers; we learn from our experiences and the experiences of others; and, most importantly, we try again.

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BIOGRAPHY

Phillip Boyett is an anthropologist, student of Latin America and aspiring social innovator. He received his BA at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, where he wrote an Honors thesis entitled, "Mickey Mouse Conquistador: Disney's Ambivalent Conquest of Yucatán." At Millsaps he won the Frances L.B. Jones Award in Anthropology. He has traveled throughout México, and much of his academic research and personal fascination revolve around the culture and people of Yucatán. By the time of this publication, Phillip will hold a MA in Latin American Studies from Tulane University. Phillip will continue the pursuit of crafting social programs to engage people on their own terms and to achieve meaningful progress towards social equity. Questions or comments about this work may be directed to the following email address: phillipboyett08@gmail.com.