

## **Trying to Make Cracks in the Mexican Educational System: the counterpoints in the learning of the students of the Degree in Rural Development Planning of the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER)* in the North Mountain of Puebla**

Germán Ortiz Palomeque<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco, Tacotalpa/Tabasco – Mexico

**ABSTRACT** – Trying to Make Cracks in the Mexican Educational System: the counterpoints in the learning of the students of the Degree in Rural Development Planning of the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER)* in the North Mountain of Puebla. This document reviews an alternative and genuine higher education model that sustainably supports learning processes through the experiences lived by students of the Rural Development Planning course at the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER)*, located in Sierra Norte de Puebla. For this purpose, the ethnographic approach was used based on interviews *in situ* in which each of the seven students (three women and four men) described how their learning has been, the experiences in their educational institution, and how these processes influenced in their livelihoods. In-depth interviews were also conducted with two CESDER teachers who described the work philosophy assumed in this house of studies. It is found that education under the CESDER approach has influenced their livelihoods because the field experiences critically reflected in the classroom are interrelated with the teaching perspectives, and with the knowledge of the peasants to generate communities of situated learning.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic Approach. Learning Communities. Rural Livelihoods. Death Projects.

**RESUMEN** – Intentando Hacer Grietas en el Sistema Educativo Mexicano: los contrapuntos en los aprendizajes de los estudiantes de la Licenciatura en Planeación del Desarrollo Rural del Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER) en la Sierra norte de Puebla. En el presente documento se estudia un modelo de educación superior alternativo y genuino que auspicia de manera sostenible procesos de aprendizaje a través de las experiencias vividas por los estudiantes de la carrera de Planeación del Desarrollo Rural en el Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER), localizado en la Sierra norte de Puebla. Para tal efecto, se empleó el enfoque

etnográfico a partir de entrevistas *in situ* en la que cada uno de los siete estudiantes (tres mujeres y cuatro hombres) describieron cómo han sido sus aprendizajes, las experiencias en su institución educativa y cómo influyeron estos procesos en sus modos de vida. También se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad con dos docentes del CESDER quienes describieron la filosofía de trabajo asumida en esta casa de estudios. Se concluye que la educación bajo el enfoque que le imprime el CESDER sí ha influido en sus modos de vida porque las experiencias de campo reflexionadas de manera crítica en el aula se interrelacionan con las perspectivas docentes y con los saberes de los campesinos para generar comunidades de aprendizaje situado.

Palabras-clave: **Enfoque Etnográfico. Comunidades de Aprendizaje. Modos de Vida Rural. Proyectos de Muerte.**

## Introduction

A trip in mid-November 2019 to the territory of the northern highlands of Puebla to learn *in situ* about the mission delivered by the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural* (CESDER) brought about great expectations, as there was news of its activities in support of the indigenous farming communities in the area. Likewise, the texts consulted increased the interest in learning about the experiences of the students and professors. Therefore, the journey from the Mexican southeast to CESDER's headquarters in the municipality of Zautla was marked by high spirits. Upon arrival at the site, it was found that since its opening, the promoters of this study center had set clear goals for the implementation of strategies and programs of sustained follow-up. These had the purpose of identifying, *among rural and indigenous communities*, the educational needs and socioeconomic problems, adopting a territorial approach. The actions undertaken gave rise to socio-educational plans and programs to strengthen the participants' capacities of fostering *good rural sustainable life processes* at a local and regional level, as well as to nurture *social subjects*. In this sense, various experiences have been systematized as a result of the exercise of its teaching roles, participatory research-action, and dissemination for almost four decades (Izquierdo Moreno, 2010; González Forster, 2016; Messina Raymond; Serrano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017). The relevance of documenting the learning experiences among its students was considered in order to make known how the ground have been laid to nurture the critical social subject as a referent of that citizen training. Such training aimed at generating participatory and resilient communities whose members are equipped with the fundamental tools to act in the medium and long term as agents of socio-territorial transformation in their communities of origin, or from their workplaces to "make cracks in the system" (Hernández-Loeza; Manjarrez Muñoz, 2016; Velasco Cruz, 2016; Messina Raymond; Serrano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017). The foregoing should be made visible as an indicator of the actual influence of the being and doing of the educational entity in the regions it serves, through institutional vocation based on a popular education model.

## Popular education at the CESDER

The popular education promoted by CESDER is an approach aimed at creating the grounds to nurture critical and empowered social subjects. These subjects would be able to face the dynamics of neoliberal capitalist which has generated regional inequalities and precariousness of peasant lifestyles in economically lagging countries. These countries currently face the excessive extraction of their natural resources by transnational corporations (Veltmeyer; Petras, 2015; CESDER, 2017). Popular education and the learning processes that accompany it are a dialectical, ethical and critical pedagogical approach. This approach starts from the experiences of social subjects to analyze them as a collective, and influence the changes and follow-ups required to build awareness of their reality and empower them to transform it (Messina Raymondi; Serrano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017). The approach helps to nurture citizenship. This implies considering popular education as a liberating ethical-political project inspired by the thinking of Paulo Freire, in the considerations by John Holloway and Hugo Zemelman. The driver of these thinkers is the social and historical subject in its experiential learning trajectory: from the experience *in situ* to the resignification and reconceptualization of their ways of life to *realize what happens to us* (Berlanga Gallardo, 2011). This re-signification of the peasant way of life implies deep reflection on cultural identity and political-ideological positioning of social subjects. It requires displacing the false posture of neutrality widely disseminated in conventional schools created by the State, and in some educational entities of civil society. Undoubtedly, every educational project has political ideological roots, whether it is oriented toward training to manage the *status quo* or training to substantially influence the transformation of the economic, environmental and socio-territorial conditions faced by the marginalized rural and urban population centers (Hernández-Loeza, 2014). In this sense, it is vital to study learning experiences in order to know what type of education is imparted, and how it affects the lifestyles of students who come to study centers with some expectations.

## Rethinking learning

The study of learning experiences at CESDER makes it necessary to conceptualize learning, its nature, its typology and, more importantly, the consequences of this process in contemporary society, which some theorists have called the Knowledge Society (Ayuste; Gros; Valdivielso, 2012).

In order to understand the study of learning, several approaches have emerged about the scenarios, factors, motivations, types, role of human memory, and the ways in which people learn from childhood to senescence (Papalia; Wendkos Olds; Duskin Feldman, 2019). Learning, thus, is a contextualized process through which attitudes, skills and values are acquired in order to transform the behavior of human

beings. This transformation aims at promoting individual and group development and, by extension, fostering the progress of a society (García Carrasco et al., 2012). There are various currents of thought on this subject that place on debate a multiplicity of issues that carry an ideological and political burden (Schunk, 2012; Evans; Reid, 2016). For example, Schunk (2012) emphasizes that learning is supported by three basic criteria:

- a) It involves change.
- b) It endures over time.
- c) It occurs through experience.

Learning is inferential, that is, in many cases learning is not directly observed but through its results. When it comes to monitoring people to identify what they assimilated during the learning process the author highlights that: "Learning is assessed based on what people say, write and perform. It implies a change in the ability to behave in a certain way, since people often learn skills, knowledge, beliefs or behaviors without demonstrating it at the moment when learning occurs" (free translation, Schunk, 2012, p. 4).

Learning occurs because there is a process of exploration to understand, based on a relationship between the subject (the person who has intellectual faculties, attitudes, beliefs, ethnic and gender identity, etc.) and the object of knowledge (the surrounding material reality). This interrelation goes for the cognizing and historical subject to unveil what they find around them - and even themselves as a subject to be explored when making an introspection - until making their own characteristics of what they intend to understand (Zemelman, 2005). In this process of assimilating what the *object/subject is*, the cognizing and historical subject encounters physical, ideological, linguistic, semantic or religious barriers that can make the learning process slow and biased. Therefore, this task should be undertaken in a spirit of critical and ethical self-monitoring (Dussel, 2016). In this sense, existential and situated learning that allows us to understand other cultures from a more inclusive approach is crucial in an era of societal changes caused by migrations from the countryside to the city, and from marginalized regions to the hubs of industrial development (Dietz, 2012). Ultimately, there are mass exoduses between countries in a global world due to the serious failures of social and institutional players to provide jobs, education, food, health services, decent housing and security for their citizens (Castells; Himanen, 2016). These phenomena pose new challenges in the way citizens are educated in a multicultural society that needs institutions focused on considering the complexities of contemporary reality in the design of their curricula (Dietz, 2012; Turbino, 2016; Quintar, 2019).

Considering that the issue of learning processes leads us to think over the educational task as a political project - of exercising rights to move away from a representative democracy toward a substantive democracy - in different areas, in a difficult journey from the family nu-

cleus to the University, it is relevant to reflect on the role played by the subjects' political culture. Political culture allows us to explore whether there are attitudes oriented to the analysis of social status and exercise of democracy among university students. What is political culture? It is a set of beliefs, practices and values that guide the actions of the members of a community in matters that affect their life in society, which implies their links with the State and its institutions. According to a scholar of the subject, political culture:

Is nurtured with values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and information of citizens regarding institutions, people (politicians, candidates, etc.) and political processes. These elements support them in pondering about their political actions: whether they support or not a political regime; whether they evaluate a government positively or negatively regarding some specific institution or the results of a given public policy; whether they participate in some way in political processes or in social organizations that liaise the social and the political (Durand Ponte, 2009, p. 121).

This culture is the result of a long process of socialization that begins in childhood in the family, and becomes more complex as people interact with different social subjects and participate in different public spaces and institutions. It can be said that education in its formal aspect contributes to this socialization. However, there is still room for the search for the educational models and learning processes necessary to face the current problems in which phenomena such as climate change, inter-ethnic conflicts, military occupation, territorial dispossession and ethnic cleansing are observed (Pappé, 2015). These phenomena trigger massive migrations that entail new learning challenges for all social subjects, and their relationship with institutions (Dietz, 2012). Political culture, thus, is being consolidated with multiple practical experiences of social subjects in their relationship with public institutions. These affect their lives by satisfying their expectations, or generating frustration by violating their civil rights and failing to respond to their huge demands (Durand Ponte, 2009).

As political culture can be strengthened through training for citizen resilience, it is a very complex task as it challenges social subjects to recognize the existence of a problem that should be addressed with urgency (Veltmeyer; Petras, 2015; Evans; Reid, 2016). This situation demands a commitment from the many social subjects. This implies transformation of attitudes, development of skills, and promotion of values for critical, ethical, propositional, reflective, responsible and supportive action in multicultural contexts where discriminatory, colonialist, racist and xenophobic attitudes are frequently observed. These attitudes involve extractivism of natural resources, land occupation, and territorial dispossession (Pappé, 2015). The different, strange, subaltern, vulnerable and *politically incorrect* are also censured *because power is questioned considering its abuses* (Chomsky; Pappé, 2016). Thus,

it should be emphasized that behind the veil of *humanist and national security rhetoric* advocated by hegemonic powers, in praxis they proceed with illegitimate geopolitical ambitions. These are unlawful because they violate the international legal framework, and unveil racist actions that point towards ethnic cleansing and genocide (Chomsky; Pappé; Barat, 2015; Pappé, 2018). Therefore, to apprehend this complex and multifaceted reality, it is necessary to rely on the concept of *citizenship*. Despite being a concept with multiple meanings, citizenship may be defined “as a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic ones) and rights and obligations (civil, political and social ones) that defines an individual’s membership in a political community” (Sumoano; Nieto, 2015, p. 9). The concept is appropriate to understand the complex dynamics of the social subject that is positioned in a globalizing/colonizing context that is home to asymmetries of power, and policies of exclusion (Pappé, 2018).

This brief literature review makes visible the problems currently faced in the world, and constitutes an important part of the topics addressed by the learning community during the CESDER pedagogical meetings.

### **The methodological journey to understand CESDER’s mission and praxis**

The many transformations in the contemporary world brings about the need to rethink the mission of educational institutions and learning processes. Consequently, this research was undertaken on the basis of the following research questions: What is a learning community? How is the peasant way of life resignified in CESDER’s learning communities? How has the learning process been at CESDER? How do students evaluate the institution’s performance? What educational trends are observed? The general objective was to describe the learning experiences of students in the fourth year of the Degree course in Planning for Rural Development. Thus, a literature review was conducted on learning processes, political culture, citizenship and higher education supported by the popular education model as a way to nurture critical, emancipated, resilient and responsible social subjects. That with the purpose of shaping an inclusive, democratic and tolerant but not permissive society in the face of excluding and predatory hegemonic projects of natural resources (Berlanga Gallardo, 2011; CESDER, 2017). During the fieldwork, the ethnographic approach suggested by Rockwell (2009) was used through interviews with seven fourth-year students of the Degree course in Rural Development Planning. Students were selected via sampling by references, or “snowball”. The first informant was interviewed and, when the meeting was over, this respondent suggested another collaborator considering their genuine willingness to participate and knowledge about the topic to be explored. In a first approach, the fieldwork was conducted from November 21 to December 16, 2019. Likewise, two teachers participated as key informants. An

observation script and an interview guide were used in addition to the field diary. At this stage, the reflections of Dietz and Álvarez Veinger (2014) were crucial to guide the work with the social subjects when referring to collaborative ethnography:

In collaborative ethnography, the encounter is understood as the scenario in which traditional roles (researcher-researched) can be blurred, and their clear demarcation is left to an insignificant level by activating processes of co-interpretation. In these processes, all parties actively contribute to interpret and construct meaning of what happens in the group (Dietz; Álvarez Veinger, 2014, p. 61).

To conduct the fieldwork, it was necessary to create an atmosphere of camaraderie with the students to build trust in the deal. For the analysis and processing of the responses, the following categories were designed: *Meaningful Learning, Pleasure, Displeasure and Expectations*. Each meeting with students and teachers was an open and frank conversation. Anonymity was guaranteed by assigning them a fictitious name.

## Counterpoints between discourse and reality

CESDER arises as an initiative of a civil society organization to meet the demands of peasant and indigenous population groups. Hernández-Loeza (2018) reviewed this in an article documenting the characteristics and modalities of intercultural higher education:

The first institution in this modality is the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural* (CESDER), which began activities in 1982. In 1989, the first generation of the bachelor's degree in Rural Development Planning entered the program, and one year later obtained the Official Validity Registration (*Registro de Validez Oficial, RVOE*). At the end of the 1990s, a group of CESDER founders created the *Universidad Campesina Indígena en Red* (UCIRED), where various postgraduate degrees, diploma courses, courses and seminars have been taught (Hernández-Loeza, 2018, p. 239).

In this process of creating educational entities necessary to promote good life processes, several stages were developed with the participation of peasant and indigenous peoples to express their economic and social needs in the face of the onslaught of the State's public policies.

In the fieldwork stage, the meanings that each collaborator assigned to the experiences achieved in four years of work were revealing. Students come from different states of the country. Some narratives are recorded in this section.

Evelia (25 years old, potter, native of San Miguel Tenextatiloyan) is one of the most active students of the Bachelor's Degree in Rural Development Planning. She is in her fourth year of the major in Solidarity Economy. She described her learning experiences at CESDER:

The way of sharing knowledge is very positive. However, in practice we face several situations that cannot be fully performed, but we try to influence a little more with knowledge and achieve it. However, when it comes to practice, there are many difficulties. This is so because, apart from our role as students, we have to be an important part of our livelihood to contribute to our family. Let's say that training is not provided, and it is geared towards practice, but in real things it gets complicated, sometimes human beings have their contradictions (Evelia).

Evelia reflects on the gift of sharing with the farmers what is discussed in the classroom, and the practice contributes to enrich the experiences to make us aware of the role to be played in the community, according to CESDER's pedagogical model. However, the route of this collective learning is not free of obstacles. As the respondent states, it is due to the fact that different roles are played internally and externally to the classroom spaces. The work in classrooms takes place every month during six days of intense sessions, and three weeks of work in the communities of origin: We start from the practice to return to the classroom and think on the experiences, raise doubts and examine contradictions encountered in the fieldwork. It is a process of *re-signification* of what has been learned in which each phase of approaching reality is questioned in the activity developed:

This type of education we receive has different names: popular education, alternative education, different education. We have to draft, narrate as the most detailed part, make a report and theorize. We go to the field and come back to think on the theory, and on the activity in the field (Evelia).

Evelia reports it has been very hard for her to keep up with the pace of work in her educational institution, but it has helped her to grow as a person. In this way, she points out that the training she has received has encouraged her to reflect about her culture and identity:

Well, it is very positive as the part of valuation, because since I remember there are these ways of life as devaluation of the poor. When they tell you this [devaluing your way of life] you feel that you won't survive. But when you live with people from different backgrounds, this shapes your experience and your way of living. I have seen the relationships of the potters in San Miguel, the relationships of those who work with palm, those who make bread, the carpenters. They live like a family. This has both favorable and not so favorable sides, as these ways of life are good, but when you go out there -to another environment- we face a world that we must be prepared for, because these ways of life are not permitted anywhere (Evelia).

While for the natives of the region these may be good and worthy ways of life, for subjects located in other latitudes this way of living life may be is contrary to their uses and customs. This leads to clashes or rejections to forms very typical of a culture, especially in times of displacement and migrations.

On the other hand, teachers contribute to the analysis and reflection about the context-related problems by taking up their students' ex-

periences, and strengthening them with theoretical and methodological concepts. Evelia is asked: What significant lessons are you learning at CESDER? In this sense, the respondent envisaged her future way, given that she is in the final stretch of her professional course:

I have had talks with my colleagues and we ask ourselves, what have we learned? We are about to complete our course, we have about half a year left, and we feel we have not learned, that the world is coming, and so on. I have mentioned to people with whom I have the opportunity to talk that CESDER is more like lived experience than knowledge. Why? Because a concept, a word, you can acquire it in a book, you read it, you analyze it and you have already acquired it. The experience, in turn, is formed or the experiences that you acquire are not only from the profession but from life itself, your own life. Because you also get to know the family, the community. And well, for me it has been difficult, because if you want to be trained you have to break several barriers, feelings, the emotional part, it is better understood by living it (Evelia).

Experiences are enhanced by the teaching practice, because the educational entity is interested in studying the subject in their historical development, and in the exchange of knowledge from the local to the global. In this sense, it is pertinent to re-signify the learning experiences of Grecia (24 years old, single, peasant, Puebla) who actively participates in the family production unit and in her community, carrying out activities such as coffee cleaning and harvesting, growing corn, and raising backyard animals. For her, the learning process at CESDER has been very positive because she acquired some methodological tools and research instruments to cope with the activities in her community of origin. She is currently studying agroecology, and believes that her stay at the university has provided her with significant experiences to successfully carry out workshops in urban areas. Thus, she faced this challenge for the first time in the city of Puebla with students from private universities. In her story, Grecia illustrates how she managed to overcome the obstacles she found, in order to speak up her word:

On that occasion, I was so nervous that I didn't know how to start the first session. They were snob students from private universities in the capital, and I was prepared to deliver a workshop to rural communities, and I had never worked with people from urban areas. So, I asked them to give me half an hour to change my slides, my didactic material designed for rural people, and to think about how I was going to approach the task. Fortunately, I came up with ideas, strategies and examples that at first did not make sense to these students - there were 12 individuals - but then I realized that they liked what I was sharing with them. In the end they even invited me to have another meeting on agroecology and composting. I have to admit that it was really difficult at the beginning. What helped me a lot was to think about what I had learned at CESDER, because the technical tools and the strategies I acquired there to work from a playful point of view helped me to soften the encounter, and finally calm me down to deliver the activity (Grecia).

Grecia's participation in rural and urban communities has given her the opportunity to learn about other ways of life, and to critically

perceive the reactions of social subjects that challenge the role of peasant ways of life from an urban perspective. Moreover, it has also allowed her to value the potential of the way of life in her community of origin.

Another notable experience was the learning evaluation by a couple of students (Dámaso and Teresa). They even reported some of the chiaroscuro of the institution. In that sense, one of the respondents (Teresa, 34 years old, married, community development promoter, Puebla) answers the question she was asked about the nature of the *Death Projects* and their study at CESDER:

In fact, in the first year there is a module specialized only in Death Projects, which are mining and hydroelectric dams. That was when we became aware of what is happening in the community. My community is an area where a large part of the population, let's say 50%, emigrates to the United States. We see many of the people with their chains, rings, earrings, and we don't know where they come from, what meaning a ring, an earring has for a territory like Ixtacamaxtitlán. And from internalizing, from listening, from knowing how much water is contaminated to leach [wash the gold], how many hills are deteriorated, how much flora, how much fauna... One becomes aware and says: I don't want those things anymore; I'm not going to use them anymore. I am going to spread this information about the cost of having these objects, bringing them in our body, and what it has meant for some people, for our territory and for our planet (Teresa).

Teresa's arguments become relevant if one considers the environmental costs of allowing mineral extraction in territories devastated by the activities of mining companies, in their quest for accumulation and concentration of capital. "It is what Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession" (Tetreault, 2015, p. 254).

On the other hand, they were asked what has been the most significant lesson learned at CESDER? Although they admitted these were difficult questions to answer, because it involved making a rote effort "sincere enough to be realistic" (Dámaso, 36 years old). In this regard, Teresa highlighted the following:

I think there were some very important things in each module. I do remember phrases, for example, that we have to problematize, that we have to examine our lives, examine our jobs, in our places in order to improve our situation. Also, the 'Methodologies of dream'. For example, when support comes to our communities, only the government brings its projects. You know what? Here we have decent floors or housing is coming. And in the reality of the communities, maybe I don't have a floor for myself, but it is another priority, and that has been very significant for me because one or the other person may not know what the other person needs, until the same person says: I want or desire this. So, this is worked through a methodology of participatory action, and based on the dream. So, it is to bring the community together, to build trust and, once trust is built, people say what they want, what they dream of, and based on that we can see what we can do to achieve that dream (Teresa).

Teresa argued that planning dreams or *planning with a subject* is to work with a methodology that is both useful and necessary to subvert

the order established by patriarchy that, with their attitudes, canceled the possibility of planning women's dreams:

Because sometimes we live a life we don't want. We live a life that someone else wanted, that is my father, that is my grandfather. That's what he dreamed of and that's what I do, but it doesn't fulfill me. So, I do what I want, what I desire. And if I do what I want and what I desire, I will do it well and that will make me happy (Teresa).

The respondent's testimonial is related to the philosophy that one of CESDER's founders, Benjamín Berlanga Gallardo, has widely disseminated: planning with subjects based on their dreams and purposes. The various experiences with this methodology gave rise to a current of transcendent thought in the pedagogy of the subject (Berlanga Gallardo, 2013).

Now, in this reflection, in order to realize *what happens to us*, it was considered relevant to ask the participants of the study about what they like about CESDER. Following were their insights:

What do I like? Starting from the way activities are organized. From the moment I arrived I was surprised; for example, the equality of the advisors, so that one does not distinguish who is an advisor and who is a student. There is no hierarchy. As a woman, I was surprised that the director of CESDER is next to me washing his dishes, washing his spoon, drying them, just like all of us. Being a man, being a director is very normalized outside of here (CESDER): I am the boss and they do everything for me, and besides, I am a man. The presses, we all rotate: we all go through washing dishes, making dinner, making breakfast. We all learn everything. The classes, the advisors' ways. For example, when we started, it was very difficult and we were listened, each person is given the same importance. They also told us that we were going to evaluate our efforts. Many factors come together here, and coming from another context you see many changes (Teresa).

Teresa's insights are in the sense of describing the work atmosphere in the educational institution, in a horizontal and equitable way of managing power relations. In this sense, the message is that *we educate in communion, doing collaborative work* in a socio-educational praxis that transcends the boundaries of classroom spaces (Messina Raymondi; Serrano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017; Berlanga Gallardo, 2020). Consequently, the work of students involves assuming ethical commitments to fulfill responsibilities that are nurtured by the raising of awareness, in a spiral learning process that involves *perceiving* what happens (Berlanga Gallardo, 2013). And it is precisely this perception that leads CESDER students to problematize the mismatches generated over time due to the lack of discipline of people who have not assimilated the philosophy of collaborative work in the presses. The arguments put forward by students lead us to rethink the roles the members of a learning community should assume, because each action illustrates the difference that exists between schooling and educating in communion. It is crucial to make this differentiation shedding light to the link between reflection and action in the complex task of transforming attitudes and

values that help the establishment of synergies. This is what Onésimo (22 years old, community development promoter, Veracruz) refers to, summarizing the perceptions that the seven respondents highlighted about what happens at CESDER:

What pleased me most is that interaction with peers, because it is a learning community. Since this stage it is already breaking with other educational schemes in which we all learn from each other. In reality, you learn by chatting with classmates at breakfast, at lunch, in the dormitories. What I don't like is that some years ago CESDER was considered to be a different school, a different education. From a few years ago it has started to falter, and I think it is because of the management process. A sound management is needed. It should be plenty of communication because it is very important for everyone, and that has to be checked a little bit (Onésimo).

According to Onésimo, *the acid test* of the institutions and educational models is the congruence, transparency and sustainability of their management style. It is an open and adaptive style to changes in the environment, for which it should have communication channels receptive to the resonances generated in its daily work (Berlanga Gallardo, 2013). The foregoing is related to the notion of *ephemeral University*, with a vocation of service, aimed at generating and innovating the offerings of courses, redesigning its curricula and programs, and updating its dealings with peasant and indigenous communities in the territory which places CESDER on the path of permanent transformation of its academic management processes (Messina Raymond; Serano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017; Berlanga Gallardo, 2020). This light of ephemeral University recognizes that challenges are exacerbated by educational problems, food insecurity, loss of biodiversity, territorial dispossession, crisis of values, impunity, daily and institutional violence, and the coronavirus pandemic. The occurrence of these phenomena demands more reflection-action on educational models, and their permanent transformation to better serve the society (Berlanga Gallardo, 2020). An example of the aforementioned is the recent redesign of the *Bachelor's Degree in Rural Development Planning* added with the redefinition of roles, creation of strategic alliances, and co-generation of postgraduate proposals between CESDER and the *Universidad Campesina Indígena en Red* (UCI Red) to offer the following programs:

a) Bachelor's Degree in Sustainable Rural Processes for a Worthy Life, with specializations in:

- Agroecology and Food Security
- Accounting and Administration in Social Organizations
- Community Social Communication
- Social Economy and Management of Cooperative Enterprises
- Pottery Processes and Technological Innovation

b) Master's Degree in Pedagogy of the Subject and Educational Practice

c) Master's Degree in Agroecology, Territory and Food Sovereignty

- d) Master's Degree in Narrative Practices in Education and Community Work
- e) Master's Degree in Education with the Youth and Adults
- f) Doctorate in Pedagogy of the Subject
- g) Latin American Doctorate in Critical Pedagogy [Project].
- h) Doctorate in Agroecology [Project].

It is important highlight that despite the financial crisis faced by the institution, ensuing from budgetary cuts in sponsoring agencies at the international level, and the republican policy of austerity implemented by the federal government, CESDER sought funding to cover the deficit of resources by carrying out consulting work to continue offering affordable education to citizens. The institution has reduced operating costs that cover consulting services, teaching materials, food and lodging at each meeting. Advisors and teachers are only supported with travel expenses, food and lodging at CESDER's facilities in Zautla. The above is a reliable sample of the management style guided by relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity typical to solidarity-based economy. In it, teaching work is exchanged as an act of generosity, or *donating a service* to the learning community, preventing education from being valued as production, and eventually exchanged as a commodity (González Forster, 2016; Berlanga Gallardo, 2020). Thus, in all educational programs, work is carried out under the semi-face-to-face modality. Each meeting becomes an opportunity for coexistence, conversation, recreational activities and intercultural camaraderie with people who travel periodically - every month or quarter, depending on the program taken - from different regions of the country. In this sense, it can be stated that getting involved in the mission and vision of CESDER implies a *commitment to life*. Hernández-Loeza (2014) states it in a text that illustrates his decision to get involved in an educational project congruent with his view of the peasant and indigenous ways of life, in a region that urgently needs the wisdom of peasants. That educational project also comprises the cognitive contributions of humanist professionals committed to nurturing active citizens, informed and aware of the problems of their territory and the historical time they have had to face.

## Discussion

During the mapping of learning experiences at CESDER, it was observed a clear orientation toward the critical and proactive nurturing of social subjects to create awareness about the complex reality that rural communities currently face in the country. By proceeding in this way, citizenship is being formed by incorporating values for the exercise of rights and obligations. These are aimed at establishing bonds of trust and informed solidarity, to resist the onslaught of modernity sustained by the extractivism of natural resources by transnational corporations, and the denial of the peasant way of life (Berlanga Gallardo, 2016; CES-

DER, 2017). In praxis, it is the search for profit of companies under the tutelage of the State, at the expense of life in the territories affected by the implementation of these projects around the world. In this regard, Tetreault (2015, p. 254) highlights that:

The growth of the sector has been spectacular over the last 15 years, in the context of free market reforms aimed at attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and encouraged by the rise in the price of minerals. During this time, the Mexican government has handed out hundreds of mining concessions to foreign companies, mainly Canadian. Those companies have state-of-the-art technology, are highly efficient in economic terms, and are totally destructive in ecological terms. These have been able to extract twice as much gold and half as much silver from the country since 2000 as was extracted in the entire period of three hundred years of conquest and colonialism [Fernández Vega, 2011]. Other minerals are also being extracted at an accelerated rate.

The author refers to the struggles of resistance fought by diverse human groups whose lives were affected by the federal government's concessions to groups of investors. These actions violated the interests of marginalized groups by creating the administrative and legal conditions for the arrival of mining companies.

In order to review an environment where life-threatening extractivist projects prevail, an educational model that promotes debate and committed reflection is required. CESDER takes up this challenge through popular education to question life. The reflections of Berlanga Gallardo's (2013) nurture a critical and emancipatory look:

Let us imagine that education is not first to know what Life is, but, first of all, to know how we are doing in life. In education we take the long road of experience to make learning, instead of the road of explanation, of demonstration. It is a matter of daring: to touch the pivotal point to the educational order, the logoi.

To suspend the knowledge of what is, of the Truth and the Duty to Be, in order to find ourselves in the suffering, in the uncertainty of being. Seek education to be ordered around the contingency, the astonishment and amazement of being and not around the "cold and dispassionate" image of being, of what is, of the written, legislated, established truth. In doing so, in attempting this epistemic turn, this other way of putting ourselves before the world to learn about it, we leave the security and the refuge of reason to venture to name the uncertainty of happening, of being. We look at the density of our own lives, and the density of what we are living in common, as a distinctive reason of educating (Berlanga Gallardo, 2013, p. 46-47).

This way of focusing on *how we are doing in life* starts from a critical and deep look that implies *realizing* our human condition subject

to the asymmetries in the exercise of power at home, at school, at the workplace and in the relations of civil society with the State.

On the other hand, those who ventured into the study of CESDER educational networks experiences have documented the political ethical positioning of their teachers, and the attitudes of their learning communities (Izquierdo Moreno, 2010; González Forster, 2016; Messina Raymondi; Serrano Arroyo; Comunidad Aguilar, 2017; Hernández-Loeza, 2014; 2018). Thus, depending on the approach a university embraces, and the congruence of its praxis, education can become a means for transforming reality, or become an instrument to reproduce the conditions of domination and oppression against peoples (Berlanga Gallardo, 2011; 2013; Velasco Cruz, 2016). When choosing to transit to subvert the order in the educational system, CESDER seeks to overcome the administrative fashions adopted by Latin American Universities interviewed by Quintar (2019, p. 253):

Let us not forget that universities were part of national development, especially during the 20th century, and were, since the 19th century, century of lights, the privileged place for generating mindsets and reference in social reflection.

Currently it seems that this place has been dissolving in the tangle of financial tensions and outdatedness in relation to their times and demands. A process of trivialization of academic work thus emerge due to an oversizing of the administrative-financial tasks, expressed in loss of quality. That despite the 'quality' indicators pursuant to the famous ISO standards, which in most cases dehistoricize and always parameterize the university work.

The author emphasizes that the standardized procedure of educational entities allows them to obtain funds. This leads to the acquiescence by university authorities, as the goals imposed by the State and multinational financial organizations have been met. This procedure, however, does not guarantee that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are responding to the cultural needs of society. Therefore, they seek to sell image and culture of simulation contrary to the mission of imbuing values in the social subject to transform its reality (Quintar, 2019; Ortiz Palomeque; Arcos López, 2020). It is this situation in which HEIs are in the country that inspired in CESDER's promoters processes of reflection. These processes derived in the decision for an alternative approach for the nurturing of active citizens who, by being integrated into learning communities converse, exchange information, become aware, organize themselves, and face the challenges of the exclusionary modernity (Berlanga Gallardo, 2011; 2013; Hernández-Loeza, 2014). This modernity is materialized through *Death Projects* that disrupt ancestral ways of living, cause peasants to see their existence in the territory as precarious lives that are not worth living (Berlanga Gallardo, 2018). In short, these Death Projects tutored by the State attack the biodiversity of the territories, and plunder the richness of their biocultural memory (Berlanga Gallardo, 2011; Toledo; Barrera Bassols, 2008; CESDER, 2017).

## Conclusions

In this tour around CESDER, attending to the voices of some of the students at the undergraduate level, we found that the educational institution has favorably influenced their ways of life. And this is so because the model implemented reverses the learning process from praxis *in situ* into theory (Evelia, Dámaso, Teresa and Onésimo). The experiences in their communities are reflected upon and re-signified in each monthly meeting to bring about learning communities that imply donating experiences in each meeting in solidarity with others (Grecia and Sammy). At CESDER they enjoy each meeting because it is enriching.

However, they emphasized that these *meetings* have gone through a complex learning process that requires self-regulation (Teresa and Onésimo). These pedagogical experiences strengthen our practices, knowledge and methodologies to influence the defense of peasant territories and food sovereignty (Teresa and Dámaso).

The pedagogical model that considers the *resignified virtuous circle of action-reflection-action of social subjects* preserves the political culture of resistance, the ways of good life to consolidate the bonds of trust and solidarity in the context of poverty agriculture. To fulfill this mission, CESDER is managed as an *adaptive social organism* or *ephemeral University*, giving rise to alliances with several players and institutions, innovating hybrid programs of technical, ethical and political training that contribute to a civic culture to subvert the order in a winding road.

Received on June 1, 2021  
Approved on August 9, 2021

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**Germán Ortiz Palomeque**, Master's Degree in Agri-Food Production in the Tropic, Full-Time Professor, *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco*, Oxolotán, Municipality of Tacotalpa, Tabasco, Mexico.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9995-1284>

Email: [georpa36@hotmail.com](mailto:georpa36@hotmail.com)

Editor-in-charge: Luís Armando Gandin

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