Over the past two and a half decades in Mexico we have witnessed a spectacular growth of voluntary and community organizations, including self-help groups, cooperatives and social enterprise movements, usually conceived of and operating independently of the government. They belong neither to the public nor the private sector. They are generally called third sector Organizations (TSOs) and have come to play a significant role with regards to rural and small-scale development and in establishing education programmes in places that government institutions barely reach. Many have developed alternative educational practices designed to be more relevant to the needs of the communities in which they operate. The work of educational professionals from within the state education institutions is less well known.

Although there is a growing literature on the rise of third sector organizations in an increasingly vocal and sometimes disorganized civil society, the story of third sector organizations undertaking root-and-branch transformation of public education from the inside has not been told. This chapter begins this task and asks the question: Can they play an important role in overcoming the obstacles we have discussed in previous chapters to reforming education in Mexico? Drawing on field research and over 20 years’ knowledge and experience of these organizations, we will attempt to show that the education they promote and, in some cases, practise is more in line with public opinion about what education should be in Mexico than that of official bodies. Although they are small in number and most operate in the micro-settings of the schools and school catchment areas, they are the most active educators in the country, combining cutting-edge pedagogy with attention to the most educationally neglected populations.
A second aspect of these educational third sector organizations presents us with a curious paradox: although they are often staffed by officially registered educational personnel – and are active in the state educational system – as a result of their activities, they find themselves marginalized or in conflict with that very system, even whilst insisting that they are untiring defenders of state education. In other words, the third sector organizations find themselves in the system, but not of it.

The third feature concerns the third sector organizations’ critiques of official education that are directed not only against the authorities but also against the official trade union (the SNTE) that claims to represent the interests of education workers. The third sector organizations draw their inspiration from two main sources. The first is fulfilling the needs and demands of the learning community they aspire to serve (a term first used by Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger in 1991), namely, the students, their parents and their community. These constituencies consist of marginalized rural indigenous peasants and workers, deskillled teachers working in the state sector, the disaffected middle class that continues to send its children to state schools and even elements of the entrepreneurial sector, angry at what they see as Mexico’s increasing uncompetitiveness. The second source of inspiration comes from national and international currents of progressive thought and action in education and social change. Typically, it is the often middle-class organic intellectual leadership of these third sector organizations that provides the impetus through their networking. These contacts within the educational and cognate sectors, and with wider currents of thought and action, help compensate for the support they are denied from the official educational system. This strength in collaboration and in connectedness with the wider world contrasts with and circumvents the closed, hierarchical clientelistic networks of the official administration.

The independent efforts of these organizations are considered to be necessary as a result of a fourth characteristic: the conviction that the officially stipulated schedules and provision of time, and indeed space, for those working in education is insufficient to achieve even some of the most basic tasks. As such, the third sector organizations consider that they must add time and effort to what is the norm. This gives rise to a large amount of volunteering, regardless of whether there are other resource and funding bases for their work.

One measure of the success of these organizations would be to gauge how much impact they have had on policy and to what extent their models of operation have been applied. Most of the third sector organizations studied did not seek to influence the general educational policy
agenda. Indeed, they have tended to distrust such activity. The principal claim of most of the organizations studied is that the official system is failing to do what its policies are designed and/or claim to do. Also, they have committed themselves to teaching the curriculum, using an up-to-date relevant pedagogy and encouraging dedicated teachers to work hand in hand with parents. This means that these third sector organizations focus less on policy as such, much of which they agree with, and more on the autocratic and clientelistic behaviour of the administration responsible for implementing it. Their critiques and work are important for the practice of building learning communities and providing more effective teaching and learning programmes.

Third sector organizations in Mexico

The Mexican third sector organizations in the field of education include private charities, business-related organizations and religious organizations of various denominations. Their activities vary from establishing their own independent schools to devising programmes for such groups as the young, rural producers and women to provide professional and entrepreneurial skills. Funding comes from the private sector, national and international programmes of education and cultural organizations, such as the ‘Escuelas de Calidad’, a direct initiative of the SEP, or reading programmes sponsored by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta).

Educational third sector organizations can be broadly classified into six types. The first of these is indigenous-based popular organizations led mainly by teachers in rural areas. These are organizations like the Congreso Nacional de Educación Indígena e Intercultural (CNEII), Educación Comunitaria Indígena para el Desarrollo Autónomo (ECIDEA) and the Tatutsi Maxakwaxi programme. The second type is independent teacher-based organizations in various parts of the country, particularly in marginal, rural and poor urban areas, notably Tamachtini, the Movimiento de Innovación y Transformación de la Educación Básica (MITEB), Centro Educativo Narciso Bassols (CENB), Bases Magisteriales, Innovación Educativa (INED) and Contracorriente. The third type is broadly based citizens’ associations of all political colours opposed to what they see as trade-union and SEP incompetence and abuse of power. Academic groups like Observatorio Ciudadano de Educación (OCE) fall into this category, as do the Asociación Civil Hacia una Cultura Democrática (ACUDE), the Incidencia Civica en Educación (ICE) and Mexicanos Primero.
The fourth type is university extension programmes that provide pedagogic resources and organizational and developmental support for local educational centres in poor areas. The Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO) is an example. The fifth type is business charities like those related to two of the major banks: Bancomer and Banamex (when it was controlled by Alfredo Harp Helú and his family) and the Laboratorios Julio. Finally, there are religious organizations that usually create or directly support educational projects. These include schools supported by Comunidades de Base influenced by liberation theology, like Fomento Educativo y Cultural (CEREAL) and private schools and institutions under the aegis of Opus Dei. To varying degrees all but the business charities work within educational institutions with the support of students and their families.

As we have seen, the highly centralized educational system presided over a rapid expansion of education from the 1940s onwards but sacrificed quality through economies of scale, such as a shorter school day, permitting double-shift teaching and such devices as multigrade teaching and distance learning and reduced spending on teachers. From the late 1970s, specialist researchers, officials and the media increasingly voiced concern with high dropout rates and poor educational quality more generally. As a response, the Mexican government began to undertake administrative reforms leading up to relocating some operational functions from the federal government to the states. But this occurred during an era of economic liberalization marked by budget cuts in the public sector. These policies did not lead to any improvement in educational performance. In fact, by the time the various international league tables began appearing in the late 1990s, Mexico’s poor educational performance had become indisputably a matter of public concern.

The two PAN governments that were in office from 2000–12 opted for, respectively, teacher professional development via payment by results (the Carrera Magisterial) and standardized aptitude testing (SATs) as strategies for lifting Mexico out of the educational doldrums. The former was soon undermined by cronyism and by poorly designed cascade refresher courses. SATs were being introduced in Mexico as a means of upgrading educational quality at the time when in some parts of the world this type of approach was becoming discredited. High impact testing sits uncomfortably with the newly reformed curriculum, which emphasizes creativity and child-centred learning, and this has led to teaching to the test and thus to a distortion of the curriculum.

Making test-driven teacher and student evaluation the cornerstone of educational policy in recent years rather than improving student
performance only served to show up the continued inequalities in provision. An OECD report (2013) on Mexico indicated that current courses intended to upgrade the teaching professional were counterproductive. A recent World Economic Forum report (2016–17) on educational performance places Mexico 102nd in a list of 124 countries and in the 2015 PISA report, Mexico was at the bottom of the OECD country tables, a position it has occupied for the last 15 years.

We have seen that Mexico’s state education, tightly controlled and insular as it is, has brooked little intervention from within the system or from outside Mexico. Research conducted more than 10 years after the Education Act of 1993 that legislated for parental and community participation in schools confirmed that the legislation has not been fully enacted (see also Basave, 2010). Paradoxically, the Mexican authorities are highly sensitive to international opinion, especially to their evaluations of Mexico’s performance in international league tables. Nevertheless, they resist what they consider inappropriate interventions by ‘externals’. Moreover, the break in decades of PRI rule that occurred in 2000 did not significantly change institutional practices. Educational issues remained of less importance than the political issues of control over resources and processes (see also Basave, 2010).

The emergence of independent dissent

Discontent with bureaucratic closed-shop cronyism from independent associations emanated from the broad-based anti-government demonstrations of the 1968 and 1971 protests, the guerrilla movements in the countryside in the 1970s, the post-1985 earthquake local citizens support movement and teacher-union protests at the end of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The 1980s were years of structural adjustment, austerity and public-sector cuts, resulting in ‘la crisis’, which according to some sources put nearly 50 per cent of the population on or below the poverty line (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2013). In 1986 salaries were reduced to their lowest point in decades. Dissatisfaction with the existing regime was manifest in the formation of the Frente Democrático that nearly, and, according to many, actually toppled the PRI in the 1988 presidential elections.

The Salinas government of 1988–94 had extended economic liberalization, but at the same time opened the way for the construction of new partnerships between government and people through the welfare programme, ‘Solidaridad’. This approach devolved some services and social support to more local levels, encouraging citizens’ participation in
development in official programmes and independent non-governmental
organizations (NGOs). Successful applications from poor and neglected
areas seeking NGO status and funds were restricted by policies of fiscal
austerity, brought about by the previous PRI administration. Thus, far
from seeing themselves as partners with the government, many were its
antagonists. There was a clear movement away from support for the poor.
Verduzco and Tapia’s research (2012) shows that although 30 per cent of
funds were given to TSOs working in poverty alleviation, only 6 per cent
of the funds went to the non-governmental organizations.

The impact of pauperization and marginalization, combined with
rising expectations encouraged by the government, and the failure to
contain the discontent it generated was reflected in the educational
sector. The protests of the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de
la Educación (CNTE), active from 1980 onwards, have been the most
widespread protest against both the administration and the SNTE for
their perceived cronyism and authoritarianism. According to other dis-
sident groups like the Educación y Cambio group that published Cero de
Conducta, the CNTE later succumbed just as much to cronyism as did the
organizations it was criticizing.

Other educational third sector organizations appeared in the
1990s. Among these were the Bases Magisteriales, MITEB, CENB and
Maravatio (see also Street, 2001). The Zapatista uprising of 1994 was
perhaps the clearest indication of popular disaffection with established
rule in Mexico. This movement has had a long-term impact on independ-
ent social activism as well as catalysing movements to reclaim indigenous
identities. It sought to redress the official neglect of or even hostility to
indigenous mother tongues and the culture and knowledge of the pre-
Hispanic peoples of Mexico.

The social currents of alienation from the PRI regime were not lim-
ited to the left and to the popular classes. From the mid 1990s, dissa-
satisfaction with the one-party rule of the PRI led to the expansion of the
hitherto small centre-right National Action Party (PAN). As with the left,
the centre and right of the political spectrum consisted not just of the
new parties (notably the left Frente Democrático) but also the smaller
associations and groups. In the educational sphere, there was a grow-
ing number of private schools for the disaffected middle class. At univer-
sity level, the hegemony of the UNAM as the source of political leaders
began to give way to the establishment of private institutions, notably
the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM) and the Instituto
Tecnologico y d Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM). A glance
at the register of NGOs over the past 20 years gives some indication of
the diversity of these independent organizations. These groups worked at local, regional and national levels and raised an increasing range of issues, most importantly that education should not be considered to be the exclusive province of the government.

The current list of registered third sector organizations working in education shows that the majority are church-based and business-related organizations. Among the most well known are the Monte de Piedad and the Charities of Carlos Slim. Typically, this, the largest sector, established their own educational institutions or provided supplements to mainstream public education, such as books, educational materials and equipment, computers and even buildings. Exceptionally, the Laboratorios Julio collaborated with the SNTE, setting up conferences and joint one-off projects. The Fundación Empresarios por la Educación Básica has been involved in the area of school management.

The other main area in which third sector organizations work is policy. The most active of these organizations is Mexicanos Primero that now has more than 100 affiliates. Mexicanos Primero is a pressure group, or watchdog, claiming to represent the interests of the citizen in public education. A notable exception to this religious inclination is OCE, founded in 1998, which has acted as a commentator on educational policy via regular publication in the mass media (see also Sutton and Levinson, 2001).

**Beyond the revolution**

Manuel Castells (1996) suggests that rather than wait for the revolution heralding the collapse of capitalism, social movements are usually established prior to this. They promote an alternative lifestyle, turning their backs on mainstream society and establishing their own post-revolutionary organizations consisting of cooperatives, shared housing, alternative economic strategies and so on. Mexico has followed this path, starting with the 1985 post-earthquake citizens’ activism and then just over eight years later, the Zapatista uprising. Many of the educational third sector organizations are also part of broader social movements arguing for grass-roots social change. Tatutsi and Tatei projects, for example, go beyond,

the mere collection of educational information, but rather press into service this information in order to help improve the learning taking place and construct an educational and social project for the community (See Tertulia IV, DF., 2012.)
The most outspoken groups leaving the existing system behind can be found in the indigenous third sector organizations. In the second National Conference of the CNEII, in Oaxaca in 2010, the steering committee emphasized its determination to create a new educational agenda for the indigenous people of Mexico:

One of our fundamental strategies has been to exchange experiences of indigenous education at field level, in the places that they are being developed, and discuss these activities in the schools among the organisations carrying them out, their curricula, their pedagogy. We have been in the Mixteca, Chihuahua, Yucatan, Michoacan with the Purepecha, in the Sierra Huichola and in Chiapas and other places . . . We have been organising training programmes to develop . . . proposals for advancing indigenous education, focusing, among other things, on indigenous languages, including the methodology of language nests (see below). (Introductory address of the anti-discrimination conference of the CNEII in Oaxaca, 12 June 2010.)

The CNEII has been strongly committed to a ‘from-the-base-up’ methodology, as well as developing educational schemes focused on the experience of local educators and learning from experienced local and national educators together with indigenous educators from other parts of the world. Even the methodology of the CNEII conferences and the consultative and consensual decision making were different from official institutions. The same applies to other indigenous education associations, notably Tatutsi, ECIDEA and the Coalicion de Maestros y Promotores Indigenas de Oaxaca (CMPIO)-supported projects. In terms of actual learning centres, the Secundarias Comunitarias not only set up state schools where none existed previously but also established unique curricula, and materials produced on site, underpinned by local knowledge, language and culture. Similarly, in other regions, where public education had not previously been available, innovative educational programmes centred on local cultures, notably Tatutsi in the Huichol highlands and initiatives in many Purépecha-speaking areas of Michoacan.

The breadth and depth of their work and the way they conduct it go far beyond the official ethos. Projects range from mobile laboratories in remote areas; on-site teacher upgrading; arts and music outreach programmes; school community development projects; the production of indigenous language texts together with instruction in their use; and ‘learning nests’ in the indigenous mother tongue in homes.
Yet rather than advertise the uniqueness of their work, their attention is focused on the next challenge or how to obtain the resources needed to accomplish it. Visiting these projects is like visiting researchers in their laboratories: the focus is on their work, the problems they encounter and how they intend to solve them. This seems to the activists the most sensible, even the only, way of working, although it contrasts sharply with the way most of their colleagues in the official system work, and indeed how they themselves worked beforehand. The new way appears to them to be the most natural thing to do. In this sense, one can say that they are living in the post-transformation world, to use Castells’ (1996) phrase.

**Sidestepping the state: finding space between the cracks**

Independent educators have come up with an alternative stratagem that we will call sidestepping the state authorities. One teacher of Signos, the independent school that has outreach bolt-on reading programmes in different parts of Mexico, described this strategy as: ‘finding the cracks in the SEP structure and knowing how to take advantage of them’. James Scott dealt with this phenomenon when examining the very different context of pre-capitalist Southeast Asia. He argued that the reason why some societies have not evolved into centralized states is not because of technological or cultural backwardness, but as the result of a deliberate decision and a disinclination to concentrate power in one source (Scott, 2010). The members of these smaller societies simply turn away from such developments and from neighbouring societies seeking to incorporate them into their own way of working. This avoidance or sidestepping an apparently irreversible or powerful force is what these third sector organizations do in relation to the apparently all-powerful education authorities.

These third sector organizations sidestep the authorities by disappearing under their radar or beyond their normal reach. They find it necessary to resort to such stratagems in order to teach. The SEP is wary of any sign of autonomy, even when this is simply to enable teachers to carry out stated official policy. Their priority is obedience to the authorities and conformity with the unwritten codes of behaviour among educational personnel. Educational imperatives come second and are always motivated by political imperatives. However, the third sector
organizations that have managed to operate for any length of time, have without exception relied on their personal connections in the SEP. Just as an inspector can ignore policy in order to reward or punish his or her teachers, so a friend of a senior official may waive hierarchical protocols to allow their friend to develop educational innovations with their team, especially if they can in return share the credit for success with senior officials or patrons.

Hence, these organizations need leaders with links to patrons/senior personnel who are willing and able to support their projects. This support at a minimum level takes the form of deflecting undue scrutiny, interference and sanctions. On occasions patrons may take a special interest in alternative projects for various reasons besides friendship. MITEB was favoured by strong political companionship with personnel in the left-of-centre Zacatecas state government of the 2000s. The newly created quasi-governmental authority, Coordination of Indigenous and Intercultural Education, proved an ally during the same period to the recently formed CNEII, connecting it with sources of finance and involving it in events and consultations at the time when the government needed to generate working relationships with the indigenous communities.

Religious or ex-religious activists benefit from wide networks and influence in many government circles and in civil society. One former Salesian was a founder of the *Tamachtini* TV secondary schools (*tele-secundarias*) that evolved into a national programme. He became a school inspector in a rural area of the state of Puebla and his influence in official circles enabled him to develop a more innovative, community-linked version of TV secondary schools than that provided by the poorly functioning national programme. Another closely related TV secondary school network in the same state relied on a committed senior inspector working with Contracorriente. Other projects take advantage of their geographical remoteness, making it difficult for officials to monitor the schools involved even though they are official schools.

The need for such elaborate subterfuges illustrates the extent to which the SEP and its associated organizations are top-down organizations and closed off from feedback from the public and from classroom practice. The only inward flow of communication occurs through personalized and individual contacts. Lower-level petitions occasionally get the attention of senior officials who are friends of friends, in other words, they work through clientele with well-placed officials.
Think global, act local 1: engagement with the base

All the third sector organizations we have looked at that work directly in the schools and, above all, in the classrooms with parents and the wider community have strong grass-roots bases. However, some grass-roots organizations transform into larger representative bodies, either to share activities or to build a constituency, the better to influence educational practice and occasionally even policy. The CNEII and MITEB in their heyday fell into this category.

Although there is considerable diversity in the membership and in other aspects among these ‘deep activist’ third sector organizations, two broad characteristics are shared by all of them: their responsiveness to the ‘learning communities’ they serve and their drawing on broad, national and international movements and intellectual and socio-political currents of thought. The teachers’ third sector organizations emerged from the older social movements such as the SNTE, which means that the union is an official not a representative body.

In this respect, they belong to the kind of new social movements that Manuel Castells (1996), and Alain Touraine (1971) have identified. Touraine’s ‘new social movements’ are distinguished by the way they reach beyond the workplace and the locality to the broader social spaces of the modern lifestyle of consumption, identity and governance. When teachers move from an exclusive concern for their pay and conditions and begin identifying themselves with the educational concerns of their ‘learning community’, they have entered the realm of the new social movements. The teachers’ strike of 1989 and more recent civil disobedience in Zacatecas have been examples of teachers acting in conjunction with or alongside parents on issues of educational provision.

Some of the third sector organizations, especially those in indigenous areas, link with broader movements at local level. The ‘Christian Base Communities’ is an example. Other third sector organizations later adopted this term, as for example, Bases Magisteriales, in Jalisco. The educational organizations linked with the Zapatista movement see themselves as part of these broad social movements, which have local, national and international connections. The third sector organizations that involve parents and the community in the sharing and dissemination of best practice are by definition part of broad-based citizens’ movements in favour of educational transformation. Although groups like ACUDE and Incidencia Cívica en Educación have sprung out of school-based actions – such as the formation of student councils and civic projects in
the community – their national and international networking, appealing to educational consumers, makes them part of the international movements in which the public takes on a single issue by entering a public space formerly the preserve of government officials. This points to a ‘citizenization’ of politics.

If the common feature of the third sector organizations is their dual reference to local concerns and international movements, what distinguishes them is their social class base. In the case of educators working with indigenous communities they address issues of mother tongue language use and include indigenous knowledge and cultural expression in their work. This is principally among marginal, rural communities, where a large proportion of the indigenous people live, and who most suffer the consequences of the ‘one-size-fits-all’ mainstream education on offer throughout the country. Most commonly, the leaders of the indigenous educational organizations are highly educated teachers or academicians, many of whom are not indigenous themselves. They are examples of Gramsci’s (1971) organic intellectuals bridging the gap between the local and the global.

Think global, act local 2: the international reach of local educational reconstruction

The linking of local action with international organizations is most clearly seen in the Base Communities in Chiapas that through their links with the activist Archbishop Samuel Ruiz managed to gain strong international support. A wide range of local organizations dealing with such areas as agriculture, indigenous languages and health were organized to achieve social justice in conditions of marginalization and official neglect, similar to the Brazilian Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). Some of the most wide-ranging educational organizations like the CNEII fitted this model.

Soon after its formation, the CNEII became one of the founder members of the United Nations Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. It also obtained financial support from the Ford Foundation and connections with senior personnel in the SEP. However, local groups, too, demonstrate this concern with international linkages, especially since, working independently of the formal educational bureaucracy, public funding is difficult to come by. Later, the Unidad de Investigación y Capacitación Educativa para la Participación (UCIEP), an umbrella organization also funded by international organizations, began lobbying
the Senate to expand indigenous rights. These and similar indigenous TSOs have developed in the context of international and national concerns with discrimination against ethnic minorities and especially, First-Nation peoples. The SEP funds its own programmes and projects but rarely supports independent initiatives. Occasionally co-funding can occur where friendly official contacts are involved.

The INED (formerly the Casa de la Ciencia) began its life as a local museum in San Cristóbal de las Casa, and then through connections with El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), it grew into a resource centre and eventually into a training centre for teachers, to a large extent because of untiring fund-raising with international agencies, and networking with the SEP and with other third sector organizations. At regional level in Chiapas, INED built a pluralistic TSO with a wide range of local groups all working on parallel educational projects in the region. This enabled both a learning community and a body of people to advance grass-roots educational work through collective effort.

A notable feature of citizen-based third sector organizations is that their very *raison d'être* is to develop extensive networks and systems of communication for their members as well as coordinating common activities, outward communications and events. The educational citizens’ organizations in Mexico cover almost the whole political spectrum, though not as a single organization. On the left are organizations like the CNEII, ACUDE and ICE, although these do include a wide range of liberal interests. On the right are Mexicanos Primero and their constituent organizations. The middle ground is perhaps best represented by the quasi-governmental organizations, most especially OCE whose channels of communication are most used by the educated middle class. Like the indigenous and teachers’ third sector organizations they are based around middle-class activists such as the leaders of the indigenous and teachers’ groups. However, the information they provide is used by teachers and indigenous organizations working at base level to inform the parents and children of the state schools that they support.

Another category of citizens’ organizations that takes advantage of broad ready-made networks are the religious organizations. The radical Catholic Church in Latin America is known for its active commitment to social justice. Although its relations with the government have more often than not been difficult, if not hostile, it can still mobilize hugely effective networks. These include priests and other church leaders, global networks, processes of dissemination through all types of media and the churchgoing public, often themselves organized in groups. The most visible are the Base Communities, which also have local networks
through parallel secular or ecumenical organizations. All the different types of citizens’ organizations count on the support of independent professionals, such as social workers, lawyers and journalists.

The teachers’ third sector organizations have a distinctive way of networking. Because teachers are usually members of the 1.5 million strong corporative union, their professional links to the world beyond the school community are exclusively those of the SNTE and the ruling parties to which the SNTE is directly or indirectly affiliated. As such, they have little experience with and/or the means of developing networks outside the teaching community. Comradeship and mutual support characterizes teachers’ lives over the often long (double-shift) working day, and over 30 or more years of working life. The lifetime tenure that all teachers aspire to and the majority have obtained, has, until recently, strengthened these bonds.

These values persist even when the teachers disassociate themselves from the comfort zone of the mainstream and mould themselves into the kinds of dissident groups discussed here. What marks off these third sector organizations from the mainstream teachers’ organizations is that they work as a team in pedagogical as in more general organizational matters. The third sector organizations aim to develop collective teaching strategies through reflection, sharing ideas and experiences, and in the most ambitious cases, actually coordinating teaching throughout the educational careers of the students and their progression through the school grades. Such a student-centred, long-term approach to teaching is absent in the mainstream educational system.

Working towards educational emancipation: A contested terrain

The third sector organizations draw upon a vast body of ideas concerned with the complex relationship between official and local pedagogies and the idea that both the content and the form of educational programmes are at the heart of emancipation through education. In Europe, many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century pedagogues like Célestin Freinet (1993) stressed the importance of learning being framed by the participants’ own categories and experiences, and enquiry-based and cooperative learning. With the development of vast and inclusive national systems of education by the 1960s, this developed into questioning the form, content and value of conventional schooling. An example of this was Ivan Illich’s concept of ‘deschooling society’ (1971). In Latin
America, Paulo Freire’s pioneering work in developing alternative pedagogies and his strategies for reducing illiteracy encapsulated the various studies undertaken largely in Europe.

Against this background third sector organizations defined their task as starting with what we can call an internal transformation, consisting of both the teachers’ reflection on their daily teaching practices and their commitment towards their charges, as well as to the needs and aspirations of the parents. Here they identify a fundamental contradiction between their classroom experience and the dictates of the authorities and the system. The teachers’ third sector organizations found themselves caught in the middle of this. As state functionaries, they had the assigned task of delivering a prescriptive and rigid set of contents. At the same time, they engaged on a daily basis with pupils and parents for whom this content and the form of presentation not only did not correspond to their perceived needs, circumstances and aspirations but also ‘interrupted’ their systems of knowing. Cowen and Shenton (2003), as a result of their research into economic and social development policies, focused on the tension between these external controls and what they called ‘the intrinsic learning impulses of students’.

The concept of external development refers to the deliberate intention of a particular authority to control the direction of the society and organize its resources. Behind this lies the notion that the government is the architect of social change through its enactment of policy. It is seen as an honest broker supposedly transcending all interests, although its architecture is one that connects with the dominant social classes. It justifies itself as the trustee of social welfare by casting the underprivileged as lacking dynamism and motivation and as needing government support. Victorian British politicians mesmerized by social Darwinism and the beginnings of eugenics considered the working class as demoralized and dispirited. Indigenous peoples in Mexico are treated similarly, though in this case their deficit is seen as racial destiny. In the educational sphere children are cast as unruly or feckless, a condition that only the state can rectify through social intervention, notably through schooling. Against these kinds of submission to external domination, Cowen and Shenton (2003) direct our attention to the much-neglected internal dimension of human beings’ intrinsic impulses and ability to learn.

Many teachers’ third sector organizations, as well as the activists in most of the others, have developed a response to this. To begin with
the pedagogical aspects, these organizations reject performance-based approaches of recent reforms. As one of the coordinators of the CNEII said in its conference in the UPN, Mexico City in 2012, and echoed by other activists: ‘[t]esting has become the curriculum, and this is the wrong way round, and damaging for learning’. Rather than performance driving the curriculum, and summative evaluation informing educators when it is too late to make the necessary adjustments to learning, they place comprehension first. The students and teachers develop the capabilities of critical thinking in their learning rather than just following instructions and absorbing preset knowledge.

Their members also reject what they term as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ curriculum. They see this as endorsing a standardized profile of what a Mexican citizen should be, ignoring as a result, the diversity of the population and negating, for example, original languages and cultures. The alternative begins with the child’s education in the home and community (most notably for example in the ‘learning nests’) and builds outwards to embrace the wider world, but always preserving the local social contexts. As such, learning is both broader and takes into account the whole range of interrelationships that a child develops at local, national and international levels. It is deeper because it starts with the child’s realities, the child having a direct and intrinsic relationship with that learning. The child owns it and is intrinsically motivated to continue learning rather than depending on external stimuli.

According to these activists, and the parents and children they serve, the biggest obstacle to educational progress is not just authoritarianism but also neglect and the perfunctory, haphazard way education is provided, in large part because of the domination of personal politics and cronyism over formal commitments, resulting in an arbitrary and erratic educational delivery. This is why the third sector organizations emphasize that they are simply doing what the SEP is failing to do, rather than just offering a completely different programme of studies: refocusing attention on the school and the child. This is the basis of their radicalism; taking seriously the child-centred rhetoric of the official programmes, which for them implies releasing teachers (and pupils) from routine, time-wasting box-ticking activities and curriculum coverage in favour of a discovery learning approach.

They seek to build from classroom knowledge and experience upwards and outwards through this pedagogical model. The source of this process is the ‘learning community’, reflecting on actual practice, in the light of leaders sharing their knowledge and research on
international best teaching practice. A MITEB leader put it in the following way:

Our approach is to improve teaching through encouraging the teachers to learn through trial and error until they find what works for them in the conditions of the classroom and in relation to the kids they have in front of them. Then we share regularly our experiences in groups of reflection. Surely this is better than blindly applying pre-set regulations sent down from people who have never worked in a classroom.

The CENB leadership have been researching the factors that promote or impede pedagogical transformation. They believe that the chief obstacle to improved teaching is the lack of time and the opportunity to learn from experience.

**Critical pedagogies**

The principal challenge that critical pedagogies make to official educational doctrines is that knowledge cannot be deposited or ‘banked’ in children by a prescribed, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Knowledge, according to the approaches the third sector organizations follow, is generated out of the instinct to learn, from experience and through interactions with people and the physical world. This knowledge then consists of material transactions with nature, social interactions between people, social structure per se (such as economic structures) and personal reflections.

It is common to hear teachers criticize the prescriptive curriculum and the lack of critical thinking among their pupils. Nevertheless, the instruction-based learning that they received in their teachers’ colleges, as well as the pressure the authorities put on teachers to cover the curriculum in its entirety, makes it difficult for teachers to inspire independent thought and puts at risk their learning. However, this is what the teachers’ third sector organizations attempt to do. They take seriously constructivist lines of thought pervading academic centres and seminars for professional educators as well as earlier approaches to child-centred learning.

An example of such a child-centred approach grew out of the INED’s resource centre where experts work directly with teachers on courses and *in situ*. In science education, teachers were encouraged to develop experimental situations in which children learn from experience. In one
In the case, the children, literally getting their hands dirty through touching and kneading different materials, learn about viscosity and the transformation of their properties in different states. Art and theatre were also taught in order for the students to develop expressive abilities; and in indigenous communities, the students learn the different approaches to mathematics in Western, and in their own, cultures. The Mixe professor of the UPN in Oaxaca, Isaias Aldáz, conducted pioneering research in this area.

In order to give parents an increased voice in the school, the CENB began to invite them into classrooms to share their knowledge and skills in such areas as the production of educational materials, sharing their knowledge of the history and geography of their region. Parents also fed back their ideas and opinions on the school’s work. The MITEB has increasingly seen the parents and community as central to their mission, involving them in the children’s school projects. The parents have responded by supporting the teachers in their recent protests against the latest round of education reforms that they understand as interfering with the new approaches to formative learning that the MITEB has been developing. Involving parents and the community is particularly rooted in the indigenous TSOs. Tatutsi had its origins in the expressed wish of parents to have regular assemblies in which they guide the school’s work. Indeed, the head teacher’s role became that of a traditional Wixarika authority, in that he or she is obliged to take decisions consensually with the whole school community. The assembly as a basic form of public consultation and decision making has become a key area in the development of indigenous education.

Another example of an educational innovation that involves people not normally associated with schools is that of the language nests operating from the homes of grandmothers in the northern highlands of Oaxaca. Rather than children being located away from their home and cultural environment and placed in the alien environment of the school, the language nests begin the learning process in homes where the mother tongue is still spoken with their grandparents. Mothers who have begun to lose their mother tongue are and continue to be integrated into the programme. As the children grow they are increasingly introduced to the national and international curriculum, but starting from a strong grounding in their own culture. The ECIDEA, a group working in the highlands of Chiapas, has the same approach, starting with the indigenous cosmovision of the area, then introducing official knowledge with the aim of producing a new, integrated learning experience similar to the ethno-mathematics of Aldáz (1998).
Contracorriente supports projects in remote regions of Puebla, often with high outmigration. One of its signature programmes is the TV secondary schools in the Sierra Negra, where an officially recognized project-based learning approach is applied to local development issues. In one region, the students conduct research into the roots of alcoholism in the area and how to tackle it. A sister programme involves the Tamachtini TV secondary schools of a whole school zone in northern Puebla. Here school projects include workshops producing bread, traditional pottery and the cultivation of garlic with special advice from agricultural experts linked to the programme.

In Oaxaca, the community secondary schools located in indigenous areas and supported by the CMIPO, in consultation with the community, have designed a course of study that is entirely focused on local knowledge and dispositions. The schools reject standards and standardized forms of qualification, considering them to be irrelevant to the proper purpose of educating the young with respect for their cultures and their needs. Unlike the ECIDEA they do not combine traditional (local) with official knowledge to produce a new, broader learning programme. This places them in a situation whereby the students leave their schools without qualifications recognized by mainstream institutions, thereby limiting their mobility and life chances outside their localities. In some communities, up to half the population is living and working abroad and there are hardly any families that do not rely on remittances from their overseas relatives. Clearly the purpose of the curriculum tailored to life in the locality is to try to generate local opportunities. Yet trying to operate against strong economic forces through educational persuasion (see also Foster, 1965, and Martin, 2004) and attempts to reverse this trend through restricting the preparation of the young for possible lives in other settings have been counterproductive. Typically, they end up providing an education that is considered second class in the national context, thereby consigning those taking it to a second-class status. An alternative curriculum is therefore a risky venture and casts doubt upon the motives of those who promote it. The option taken by ECIDEA and Tatutsi of integrating traditional, culturally specific contents into the mainstream curriculum, not only avoids these risks but also may even prove to be a better preparation for students.

**Educators and the learning community**

The three main types of third sector organizations: the teachers’ collectives, the indigenous associations and the citizens’ organizations have
different approaches to the construction of learning communities. Firstly, the teachers’ organizations see the essence of their work as pedagogical and didactic, focusing on critical reflection of their work as a group in order to try, test and transform their teaching away from what they see as the staid prescriptiveness of conventional teaching and learning. Because parents, as seen in the last chapter, traditionally have been treated as passive recipients of their children’s education, the third sector organizations have only slowly found ways to involve them more closely in the processes. Nevertheless, there are important examples of parental involvement, as in the CENB and the MITEB.

Secondly, promoting parental participation in their children’s education is part of the main purpose of citizens’ third sector organizations, notably the ACUDE and the ICE. They aim to make official education more responsive to its users rather than to particular interest groups that tend to filter, control and stratify access. The ACUDE and component members of ICE have their roots in school-based projects. In the early 2000s ACUDE helped develop a children’s school board in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Mexico City. From this type of involvement and with a large network of organizations carrying out similar work, ACUDE has been building their campaigns for a democratic education at national level. Most members are educators or educational researchers and activists. However, not all are teachers, and even though closer relationships with independent teachers’ organizations exist, the emphasis in the work is on giving a voice to parents, children, the school community and the public at large and encouraging them to play a more active role than is customary.

The indigenous associations almost by definition emphasize their rootedness in the community and the parents. All the indigenous third sector organizations draw from the indigenous world views of the schools in which they work – the idea that education is a seamless part of the socialization of the child from birth through schooling and beyond. This explains why parents become so involved with the child’s schooling and why they place such importance on assemblies as their preferred form of participation in educational matters.

A common response of the educational authorities when presented with innovative projects and programmes developed outside official SEP policy is to dismiss them as unimportant, small and unable to be scaled up. The SEP and SNTE are highly sensitive to autonomous educational initiatives, since they consider that public education is the business of the state, not civil society. Leaving aside the official hubris behind such responses, there is truth in the fact that many innovations never go
beyond their immediate birthplace, because those working on them are too busy developing, honing and applying their innovations to extend their reach. They lack the networks and experience to promote their work. Yet for their work to survive, let alone be scaled up, in an ethos of hostility towards independent action in the highly controlled and centralized setting of public education in Mexico, independent actions need the support of local, regional, national and international networks.

Indigenous organizations have proved better at this than the independent teacher organizations on the whole. The teachers, accustomed to their union groupings and local school-zone collectives, have not been able to reach out to external agencies. They have found it difficult to find a new home in an alternative fellowship or network. Many do have international connections, but these are not continually activated and rarely feed into and directly support their companions, especially when they are up against opposition from the government. However, most are aware of the importance of these networks to compensate for their estrangement from the SEP–SNTE nexus. Contracorriente has been especially active in its networking in order to take advantage of its university research connections, international migrant association networks and its communication and social media knowledge repositories.

The tension between their role as a state employee and their vocation to serve the community is well summed up in the phrase coined by the umbrella teachers’ third sector organization, Educación y Cambio, ‘Return the gaze to the classroom’ (Cero en Conducta, 1985). An active Bases Magisteriales teacher explains how, when the local educational authority was pressuring teachers to persuade parents to buy crib sheets for upcoming tests, he was torn between his conscience that told him that the authority was taking advantage of parents and his solidarity with his peers who decided that objections from the teachers would prejudice the school at a later date. His Solomonic solution was buying the crib sheets for his own students with his own money.

An example of sustained thoroughgoing externalization of its work is the CNEII, at least during its more active period between 2000 and 2012. Rooted in a network of local indigenous groups working in education, the CNEII’s regional and national meetings focused on exchanging experiences and agreeing on a protocol for working together in the future. Through contact with senior personnel in the SEP, a relationship was established with international funders to finance its activities. Later on, the CNEII members made contact with the legislature and canvassed representatives on the need to eradicate discrimination in education (i.e. with regards to general provision and language). From an increasingly
nationwide network of indigenous educational groups, and with a presence in the legislative and executive arms of government, the CNEII began arranging meetings to share experiences of developing materials and deliver broad-based workshops in which national and international experts contributed. This is how the ‘language nests’ were developed. Furthermore, meetings were held to coordinate campaigns. One of these was a large anti-discrimination campaign organized throughout the country.

Another example demonstrates the two-way flow of externalization and learning feedback to the organization. This was the campaign to take the SEP to court for discrimination against indigenous pupils through testing and teaching in the second language, Spanish, in areas where the mother tongue was indigenous. This campaign started with just one committed head teacher and a set of parents and teachers. After a long legal battle in which the CNEII was the chief coordinator, the teachers and parents eventually won the case before the National Commission on Anti-Discrimination (CONAPRED) and an official court of justice. This combination of actions brought to public awareness a renewed purpose in education, in this case, the legally established right of all children to education in any of the national languages. It pointed to the routine flouting of this law, and won a legal victory that can serve as a precedent.

This conveys only a small part of the overall vision and intention of indigenous education, even though many more conflicts and disputes in the same field were lost rather than won. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the power of national, local and international linkages in projecting a renewed educational purpose that challenges the comfortable status quo that the SEP is the dominant player in all matters concerning public education and has been failing in its purpose even on its own terms. The achievements of CNEII still fall short: there is a long way to go before indigenous or other learning communities can determine their educational programmes within the public system (some have already done so outside it). Although CONAPRED charged the complainants together with the CGEIB to examine and recommend measures to attack discrimination in other areas of education, political opposition and foot-dragging soon brought this process to a halt.

Victories for the third sector organizations can be pyrrhic too. Tatutsi eventually succeeded in obtaining support for its intercultural school with teachers eventually being paid by the authorities. However, this success brought with it the cost of having to bring contents and teaching into line with standardized SEP requirements, and to cede control over school policy to the SEP. Others have fought similar battles. The
teachers’ third sector organizations have relied more on contacts inside the SEP, or university staff, especially those in the National Pedagogic University. The MITEB grew in the conjuncture of two left-of-centre governments in Zacatecas that drew in senior educators and UPN academics. These organizations negotiated spaces for MITEB to develop its radical reflexive in-service teacher training that eventually went national. Learning communities developed through continuous pedagogical innovation and parental involvement to the point where the schools in which the MITEB has been most active are recognized as being of superior quality. With the change in government in 2010, MITEB was orphaned and its members beat a retreat to the UPN.

An alternative vision

The central point about this alternative vision and practice of education is that not only is it based on purely educational rather than political criteria but also that in uniting rather than separating educational objectives from its users, it legitimates itself by attempting to find ways in which the power of contextualization based upon local knowledge can be released to emancipate the individual from what holds him or her back. The alternative could well be to examine the educational experiences of models closer to home, namely those carried out by the independent organizations that have been the subject of this chapter. The third sector organizations in Mexico, as with similar independent ones elsewhere, developed out of the frustrations of local educational stakeholders with the incomplete and inequitable educational provision over the preceding decades. This radicalized an important part of the third sector organizations in Mexico, especially those working inside or close to the heart of the system of education, principally teachers and educators in poor areas. At the same time, their rules of operation limited the range and scope of their activities to little more than additions to official programmes and collaborations with the authorities to make up for shortfalls in or misappropriations of public expenditure. The net result has been mutual suspicion and even hostility on each side rather than a partnership in a more open regime of educational provision.

For their part, the ‘deep activist’ third sector organizations have learned to sidestep the authorities and disappear as much as they can from the authorities’ panoptic gaze. In part, this has been achieved through the intervention of friends in high places; in part working on the margins of the official system and working from inside outwards; from
the immanent characteristics of learning, rather than from the external intentions of the highly politicized doctrines of the authorities, filtered and drained of educational resolve by the time they reach the school.

Whilst this novel way of working in the Mexican context is not unknown in other parts of the world, in Mexico it is highly innovative and requires enormous inputs of thought, time and effort. It is fraught with tensions between practices, colleagues and operational styles. Yet the result is consistent with the cutting edge of innovative pedagogies promoted at international levels. The latter has included many of the third sector organizations in its register of world educational innovations. The new pedagogy and the democratic educational organization that surrounds it is lived in the microcosm of their area of influence like an oasis learning community, similar, as we have seen, to the post-revolutionary lifestyles Castells (1996) has described. In the last chapter of this book, we examine systems of education and how they change.