

Government versus Teachers: The Challenges of Educational Progress in Oaxaca, Mexico

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This paper considers education in the Mexican state of Oaxaca and the effects that an active teachers' union has had upon not only the education of the primary and secondary schools that the teachers represent, but also on higher educational policy in the state. The difference between rhetoric and reality is explored in terms of the union as a social movement, as well as the messy political environment in which it must operate. Through the presentation of a case study of a public higher education initiative, it is argued that the government's response to the teachers' union has included a "ripple effect" throughout educational planning in order to suppress further activism. It is concluded that the prolonged stand-off between the union and the government is counterproductive to educational progress and has turned the general public's favor against the union, in contrast to support for other movements demanding change from the government.

Introduction

Mexico has a turbulent history of repression and resistance, from the famed 1910 Revolution against the Spanish-dominated dictatorship producing Robin Hood type figures such as Emiliano Zapata, to the 1999 indigenous Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas, named after the aforementioned hero of the previous rebellion (Katzenberger, 2001). In the neighboring region of Oaxaca, teachers had been organizing and demanding change from their government. For over twenty years they have continued to struggle for improvements in infrastructure, materials, working conditions and pay. However, a growing resentment has accumulated amongst students and their families as days camping outside of government offices means increasingly lost learning time being absent from school. Similarly, public opinion has soured against the teachers' union as protests often include actions to disturb public life, such as blocking main streets and plazas, occupying government buildings, and slowing down administrative duties. With so many years engaged in dispute with the government, so much disruption and relatively little accomplished, it is arguably time to readdress tactics and redress lost time for Oaxacan teachers' unions, who appear to be the stakeholders worst affected by the situation.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section is an overview of the state of Oaxaca in terms of demographics, diversity, and historical marginalization. Secondly, the beliefs and actions of the teachers' union are described, along with successes and weaknesses of their activism. Finally, a case study of Oaxaca's "Development Universities" is presented, analyzing how it has been affected both positively and negatively by the on-going movement for educational development in Oaxaca.

The case study relies upon personal experience and primary data as the author worked at one such university from February 2012 to July 2013 and conducted a questionnaire with the university students. Qualitative data was also gathered from interviews conducted with a secondary school teacher heavily involved in union activism, a university senior manager, and a university counselor.

The State of Oaxaca

Classified as a “first world country” due to its economic development, Mexico still suffers from the highest child poverty rates in the OECD (Huerta & Goglio, 2013). Oaxaca ranks the second poorest state among the 31 states of Mexico, despite possessing a wealth of biodiversity and benefitting from tourism; it is particularly significant that Oaxaca is home to 33% of the country’s indigenous population. Of 3.5 million inhabitants, over a third speak one of the 90 dialects within fourteen indigenous languages. Seventy-six percent of Oaxacans live in extreme poverty (compared to the national average of 42%); 22% are illiterate and only 42% complete high school; with indigenous people suffering the most socioeconomic marginalization. Oaxaca has a human development index (HDI) similar to Africa’s average at 0.7164 (OFI, n.d.). As a result of these conditions, around one million Oaxacans have migrated elsewhere, with 90% in the US (OFI, n.d.; Sawyer, 2010).

The 1999 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) meant that many goods, including Mexican staples of corn and beans, entered Mexico’s internal market, leading to a collapse in agriculture and a subsequent exodus of Oaxacans to low-paying jobs in the US (Renique, 2006). As a result, after tourism, remittances comprise the second-largest source of income for the state (Renique, 2006).

Various issues are summarized by the Rector of Oaxaca’s relatively new “Development Universities” discussed later in the paper, for example,

Oaxaca’s low socioeconomic progress is further complicated by a series of geographical and cultural factors, such as a very mountainous terrain, which makes communication difficult and has resulted in the isolation of communities, the enormous cultural diversity, the multiethnic character of the population with 16 major ethnic groups, and a multitude of languages and their diverse variants or dialects. (Vasquez, 2010, p. 145)

Furthermore, young people search for work in other areas of Mexico or in other countries leading to a “human decapitalization in local communities which lose the leadership and dynamism of younger populations” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 146). Thus, Oaxaca’s issues are multidimensional resulting in low living standards and a lack of opportunities leading to ‘brain drain’ which further exacerbates the state’s problems.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mexican government was preoccupied with combating illiteracy, viewing it as an impediment to development and progress (Quijano & Traffano, 2013, p. 38). The government pushed to create schools in rural areas – often asking impoverished town councils to provide the resources due to lack of state resources – filling them with untrained teachers. In 1928, only 6% of these teachers had attended higher education (Quijano & Traffano, 2013). Spanish was promoted in an attempt to provide a universal language of communication, as happened across Latin America (Tomasevski, 2003), and the ratio of monolingual to bilingual citizens rose from 1:1 in 1930 to 1:2 in 1940 and 1:3 by 1970 (Quijano & Traffano, 2013, p. 38). However, bringing mass “hispanicized” education to rural areas led to a parallel process of loss of indigenous culture and language (Quijano & Traffano, 2013, p. 38).

The problems described by teachers in one region of Oaxaca during the 1970s included illiteracy, poverty, indifference from authorities and parents, “irresponsible teachers” who abandoned their teaching duties, learning difficulties for students who spoke an indigenous language, the problem of getting children to school who lived in isolated hamlets, lack of teaching materials, lack of medical attention, and malnutrition (Quijano & Traffano, 2013, p. 30).

An interview with a secondary school teacher from this region in 2013 revealed many persistent problems such as the lack of teaching materials, lack of nutritious food (or enough food at all),

economic poverty, and indifference from the government; illustrating that many problems are not being resolved in these rural areas today.

The OECD claims nearly all Mexican children aged 4-14 are in school, and completion in upper-secondary and higher education (HE) is “being worked on”, though the organization admits that “quality improvements have not kept pace with the expansion of coverage” (Toledo & Ramos, 2013, p. 120). This illustrates that school attendance does not assure educational quality. Furthermore, in rural Oaxaca, the Oaxaca Fund Initiative states that educational opportunities post-primary range from “inadequate to non-existent, with an increasing number of dropouts after 11”, and 90% of indigenous teachers do not have appropriate qualifications. Some areas’ secondary schools are what the government coined “telesecondaries”; using classes recorded in the city and broadcast to isolated schools in order to ensure a minimum teaching standard. This initiative was started in the 1970s as an innovative way to address some of the issues of education quality.

With regard to expanding HE coverage in Mexico, compared with the national average of twenty-six percent, only five percent of the Oaxaca’s indigenous population reach middle or higher education. Nevertheless, Oaxaca has a perhaps surprising ratio of fifteen women to one man in HE (OFI, n.d.). The UN’s Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2013) found that despite indigenous women continuing to face gaps in access to HE and employment in Latin America, great progress has been made since 2000 (Collyns, 2013). Furthermore, upper-secondary level (sixth form college) is not free, creating a barrier to many Oaxacan students wishing to progress to HE.

Ensuring that education is established in isolated, rural areas is an issue in many developing countries; from physically building schools, to ensuring a minimum quality within schools in terms of trained teachers, acceptable teacher to student ratios, sufficient teaching and learning materials, relevant curriculum, and so on. As pointed out by Tomasevski (2003), in all levels of education: “Problems are inversely related to proximity to the national capital – the more distant children are, the less likely problems are to be addressed.” (p. 24)

Oaxacan Teacher Activism

In response to the grave situation of education in Oaxaca, Oaxaca’s teachers decided to demand change. Strikes began over twenty years ago with teachers asking for better salaries and working conditions, as well as free lunches, books, and uniforms for students (Renique, 2006). The protests reached a crescendo in 2006 when a teachers’ encampment in the state capital’s center suffered a violent attack by the police, provoking public anger and a demand for the resignation of the Governor due to corruption and violence. During his two-year rule thirty-six political assassinations as well as numerous arrests and “disappearances” created an atmosphere of discontent (Renique, 2006). Close to one million people participated in the protests. In response, the government created a website with the information of union leaders, politicians, and academics accused of ‘subversion’ against the government (Renique, 2006).

However, eight years later corruption and repression continues, as does the substandard level of education in rural Oaxaca. The teachers’ union strikes are therefore maintained. A secondary school teacher explains the process:

We hand in a petition to the State government each year outlining the necessities of our schools: ‘Do you know, Mr. Governor, we need blackboards, we need uniforms for the children, we need books, office materials.’ And we give them a month to respond. In this month, the only thing the government gives us are small things, some crumbs that don’t cover what we’re asking for. So the union says that if they don’t respond, they’ll gather all the teachers, and when they are ignored again, that’s what they do to define the mobilization and the strike.

So, education stops in Oaxaca and we begin to demand through mediums of protest. For example, by blocking roads, taking over governmental offices, taking control of the historic center; many things to aggravate society, to aggravate the government so that they respond to our petition. Why? Because this money coming from UNESCO - from the federal government to the state government - is most of the time given to something else, not education.

The strike can last five days, ten days, fifteen days, a month, two months, three months, depending on the solution that the government wants to give. In 2006 teachers didn't work for six months! Six months, until we dragged out what we asked for and we went back to the classrooms. (Interview, May 2013)

This disruption affects not only people in the city center, but also the rural students who are missing classes. From the author's questionnaire, it was revealed that, out of thirty self-selecting students, suspension of classes was common in primary schools for fourteen students; sixteen at secondary school level; and six in sixth form colleges, with the amount of time ranging from two to three days, to two to three months, the average being around one month per year. In contrast, students who had at some point attended a school in Puebla (a neighboring state) reported no days of school missed at all.

Although some parents and teachers support the union's methods, others are exasperated with the loss of school days. An incident in 2013 in a normally-peaceful community near where the author was living in Oaxaca illustrates the frustration felt by some: parents fed up with teachers' strikes reportedly seized some of the teachers and forcefully paraded them around the town square to make an example of them.

Students were also concerned about how the strikes adversely affect learning. One university student with a young child in primary school expressed frustration:

The problem of education in Oaxaca is the teachers that make students go without classes when they go on protest. They don't like working and prefer to block the streets, the bad part is that despite this, teachers carry on receiving their pay and curiously they are the BEST PAID IN MEXICO (capitals in original) which is unjust, but they still plan dates to protest. These teachers that I'm referring to are mainly from primary and secondary, though I believe that it can happen at universities, with the exception of SUNEI (the system of universities discussed in this article).

However, another student felt that the government was culpable:

Over time education has changed, now it's difficult to get work unless you have a high level of education. Oaxaca State's education is one of the lowest in the country - the principle problem is the government, they don't help but demand regardless.

Another student considered the teachers' motives, but lamented the outcomes:

I believe that the teachers will never change with their strikes, and those that end up affected are the students. They should give classes and find representatives to go to the strikes, instead all of them. Nevertheless, it's good that they think of us, but I think they should also think about those of us who want to study and continue studying.

Public opinion of the strikes is divided, being seen as either a movement for social justice, or a result of posturing, laziness or greed. This might represent a failure on the union's part to effectively communicate its aims to the public, or alternatively exasperation with continued activism that is doing more harm than good in their eyes, as Oaxacan students continue to score badly on standardized tests (Krupnick, 2013), and classroom resources are still lacking in many areas (Solorio, 2013).

Despite some students complaining about the missed days, with some blaming the government, others the teachers, and some simply lamenting the boredom of staying at home looking after the farmland, a greater number of students complained about the lack of qualified teachers and the unfair way in which some teachers get their jobs “gifted” to them if they have family members who were teachers:

Education in Oaxaca from primary to sixth form is very problematic as many teachers don’t have degrees, they just get the position from being children or family of teachers.

These comments highlight that there are internal teacher training and professional development issues on which the teacher’s union should be focusing on in addition to the macro political and economic issues.

A further salient issue with the inner functioning of the union is that teachers are rewarded for active participation: for example, a high number of days attending strikes may increase the likelihood that a teacher moves out of rural areas to eventually teach in a city (Interview, June 2013). This reward system encourages extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation for activism, which is surely damaging to the movement if teachers are not invested emotionally and intellectually.

SUNEO “Development Universities”, Oaxaca

This section analyzes the government’s attempts to improve HE coverage in rural Oaxaca through providing scholarships at universities established in isolated areas. The author spent time at one such university and witnessed how the high standards aimed for were hindered by deficient pre-HE education. It is also discernable from planning and management decisions that unrest in the Oaxacan teachers’ union, combined with student protest elsewhere in the country, has led to reactionary policies that restrict teacher and student voice as well as involvement in bringing about change within the education system and, indeed, the wider political situation.

The System of State Universities of Oaxaca (SUNEO) began in 1990 with the Technical University of the Mixteca (UTM) in an attempt to create “first quality universities that are public and at the service of the least privileged Mexicans in one of the most marginalized states of Mexico”: high quality teaching and research promoting culture and development (Vasquez, 2010, p. 142). The success of UTM – which now serves around 3,000 students– led to the establishment of fourteen other campuses in the eight regions of Oaxaca, which also provides bookstores and sometimes even clinics that serve the towns (SUNEO, n.d.). All universities offer full or partial scholarships, including food and board for students with the lowest incomes, with more than ninety percent of students receiving some kind of scholarship (SUNEO, n.d.).

The rationale behind state-funded HE places is so that “no student lacks the opportunity to study because of economic reasons” (UTM, n.d., para. 2). SUNEO also state that their universities exist to “prevent the loss of human capital in the most deprived regions, which because of the lack of educational opportunities, watch the younger generations leave...” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 151). In a similar tone, the philosophy for striving towards the highest standards of teaching and research quality is to: “Contribute, in a globalized world, to the competitiveness of the economy of Oaxaca and Mexico” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 151).

From a human development outlook, the promotion and preservation of indigenous cultures, as well as national and universal culture is important for these institutions because “one cannot reduce the role of the university to a human resource factory for businesses” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 134). The Rector sees the universities as “a motor to generate an area of development” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 84), with universities offering subjects in pertinent fields lacking development in each region such as marine studies by the coast, medicinal properties of plants in the bio-diverse

interior, and IT across the state. This is a positive step for Mexico's development since the World Bank (2013) reports that too many students graduate in fields not useful to the country. In Oaxaca, "of the miniscule number of Oaxacans who gain a university degree", 1/5 become primary teachers due to the assurance of employment (Krupnick, 2013, para, 9). The OECD reported that in Latin America, "Particular efforts are needed...to make tertiary education more relevant and accessible to more students" (Toledo & Ramos, 2013, p. 122), and this is what SUNEО is trying to accomplish.

Despite these commendable goals, there are aspects of the university system that are affected by substandard primary and secondary education, exacerbated by numerous days missed from school per year due to teachers' strikes. Furthermore, there are various policies that appear to be a reaction to prevent activism on campus.

SUNEО universities' physical layout is designed so that enough physical exercise is gained through "controlled travelling" moving from building to building (Vasquez, 2010, p. 74). Despite good intention, some areas of Oaxaca can reach up to forty-five degrees Celsius (approximately 110 degrees Fahrenheit) and thus disrupt or make very uncomfortable travel to some universities. Moreover, there is a lack of staff rooms, common rooms, and outdoor seating, reportedly stemming from a desire to prevent the development of Latin America's historically-common "critical universities" – institutions that are highly political and challenge unrepresentative governments (Vasquez, 2010). SUNEО's Rector believes that a university "should commit itself to change, to social progress, and to justice. At the same time, it must avoid the other extreme of turning into a university of activists, of replacing its academic role with political militancy" (Vasquez, 2010, p. 47). This worry derives from Mexico's history of not only teacher strikes but also student strikes (Rhoads & Mina, 2001; Krupnick, 2013). While some view the politicization of higher educational institutions (HEIs) positively as a way to hold governments to account, it appears that others do not agree, instead wishing to suppress critical voices.

Due to the universities being situated outside of urban areas, SUNEО offers a competitive salary to attract professionals to teach, and to stay teaching, in rural parts of the state. SUNEО takes pride in its "strict work regime" demonstrated by a five year full-time schedule for university students and digital fingerprint check-in for professors to ensure that teachers work the hours they are paid for. There also exists a "prefect system" in which both teachers and students are tracked by employees who walk the campus to check that everyone is where they should be and are told to move along if seen talking for too long, either by the prefects or through cameras placed around the universities.

In at least one of SUNEО's universities, there are problems with its student population in terms of high dropout rates (Zempoalteca et al., 2010; Lopez, 2012), with a definition of a dropout as "a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school..." (US government definition cited in Al-Hroub, 2013, p. 2), leading the university to have a higher staff to student ratio, something not economically sustainable, despite providing employment in the area. Every year, around 50 to 80 new students enter the university; however, while teaching there, the author attended two graduations with a total of 14 and nine students, respectively. Zempoalteca et al. (2010) estimate at least a twenty percent dropout rate, *per semester*, at one such university. Currently there are around 150 students comprising the whole student population despite the Rector himself writing that a student population under 500 is economically unsound (Vasquez, 2010). These figures illustrate the severity of the retention problem.

In an interview a SUNEО university counselor expressed their opinion, explaining that dropout in first year is mainly due to the heavy workload, as well as lack of extra-curricular activities

(see also Al-Hroub, 2013). In years two to five, the counselor stated that reasons are usually either academic – students struggle with the gap between the academic requirements of secondary education and university - or economic, as scholarships depend on students' grade average and the full-time schedule interferes with students' ability to find part-time subsistence work. These assertions are supported by Zempoalteca et al.'s 2010 study into dropout rates at the same university. Academic problems can be linked back to deficient basic education, and the heavy workload and lack of student clubs to a desire to have a high level of control over students in order to deter activism.

There also exists a contradiction between the government offering free schooling at primary and lower-secondary school, scholarships at university, but providing no financial assistance at upper-secondary level, contributing to low enrolment figures. A secondary school teacher heavily involved in the teacher's union describes:

In the community where I work, normally for every 10 students in secondary, only about one or two enter sixth form, that's all. The other eight go back to work in the countryside to look after their animals, or they go to the city to look for work, or to the US. They just don't have enough money to go to sixth form... [and] they don't see the usefulness [of the curriculum] for the reality in which they live. Many students say: "Why should I care about algebra if I don't have the money to carry on studying? I'm only going to finish secondary and then go to look after my animals in the countryside." (Interview, May 2013)

Sawyer (2010) argues that only families receiving remittances can afford to send children to sixth form. In accordance, Szekely (2009) agrees that high dropout rates in Mexico are due to financial problems and a lack of relevance (in Toledo & Ramos, 2013). This planning disparity is a major obstacle in ensuring that low-income youths can access HE; thus, as recommended by the World Bank (2013), the state must offer "funds to support low-income students from primary school through to university" as well as a modernized curricula for the twenty-first century (Krupnick, 2013, para. 23). In 2012, Mexico set 2022 as a deadline for attaining compulsory universal coverage in upper-secondary education (Toledo & Ramos, 2013). Success in this area in Oaxaca would encourage students to continue to HE, increasing enrolment rates.

The problem remains, however, of offering high quality HE in an area served by sub-standard primary and secondary education (Krupnick, 2013). Thus the quality of primary and secondary must be addressed simultaneously in order to give students the chance of making the most of their education, according to their human rights.

Conclusion

The Mexican government's approach to improving HE coverage in rural Oaxaca provides quality institutions in areas without previous access to universities, offering free places to those that cannot afford it and could not have attended university otherwise. This is an approach that should be commended and replicated. However, if Oaxaca does not remedy the inadequate state of its rural primary and secondary school education, its investment in HE in the most isolated areas will be an expensive enterprise that benefits very few.

The desperate need to improve Oaxaca's education is tangled in a "Catch 22" situation: poor education fuels a rightfully angry teachers' union that abandons classes to participate in prolonged protest strikes in a twenty-year long stand-off with the government, which have limited results. Mere "crumbs" are offered to appease the union until next time.

Another university student participating in the questionnaire offered an analysis:

Negatives: There are still labor strikes by the union, they don't tell us why, mainly by primary school teachers. Then they don't recover the missed classes and the student's learning deteriorates and they fall behind in the knowledge that they should have.

Positives: Fortunately, they keep giving free books as well as uniforms and stationary.
Suggestions: Make a new educational model where they push the student to learn more and where, if there is a strike, they make up the lost classes, also informing us about their motives.

Dialogue between teachers, parents, and students may thus be one way to ease tensions between teachers and the public, so that students and their families are aware of striking teachers' motives if they are trying to push for educational benefits for the students, for example. Current approaches to demanding change from the government that exclude student voice and are sometimes detrimental to students' education must be replaced with an inclusive discussion about what is still needed and how to address desired changes.

Both the government and the teacher's union need to change their tactics towards getting what they want in order to encourage educational development in Oaxaca, as currently both are inadvertently hurting the young people whose interests they claim to represent.

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