

# CHOL YOUTH AND EDUCATION. TWO HISTORICAL MOMENTS

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Gracia Imberton Deneke  
gimberton@gmail.com

INSTITUTE OF INDIGENOUS STUDIES UNIVERSIDAD  
AUTÓNOMA DE CHIAPAS, MÉXICO



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— Abstract—

In this article I analyze the historical conformation of youth in a Chol rural locality, involving two processes related to education: the emergence of bilingual teachers in the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, and access to university education, a bet for survival taken by a large number of young people in the 21st century. I reconstruct the broad context in which both processes took place to indicate differences between generational relations in each period. I also discuss the experiences and aspirations of current university students, which are based significantly on the achievements of bilingual teachers.

**Keywords**

*Chol youth; education; generations; aspirations.*

In the 21st century, higher education has become an alternative for a large sector of young Chols in Rio Grande<sup>1</sup>. I propose that the aspirations of these students today are based, in an important way, on the experiences of previous decades of other young people -bilingual teachers-, considered, in general, successful. In this article I examine the social conformation of this sector in both periods, changes in generational relations, and conditions and expectations of contemporary university students, in the context of the socio-economic and cultural transformations of a rural locality.

#### YOUNG PEOPLE, YOUTH, GENERATIONS: AN APPROACH

In Mexico, anthropological studies on young people began just a couple of decades ago, although the vast majority of them are emerging in the 21st century. This fact contrasts with the anthropology of earlier times that carried out little research on the subject. Dedicated primarily to the study of indigenous peoples, it is likely that it was judge unwise to speak of youth considering that among these groups children were moving directly into adulthood (Perez Ruiz, 2011). This situation may explain why, even today, several authors fail to recognize the existence of young people in these societies.

It is not my purpose to summarize the debate and the different positions that exist in Mexico regarding the characterization of young people, since there are several works that already do so, for which I refer to Pérez Ruiz (2015 and 2011), Mier & Terán & Rabell (2005), Alpízar & Bernal (2003) and Urteaga Castro Pozo (2011), so I will go on to explain how I will be handling it in this article. I take up again the constructivist perspective of Pierre Bourdieu clearly outlined in his article "La 'jeunesse' n'est qu'un mot" of 1978. In this article, the author describes youth as a social construction that acquires different contents in different cultures and social groups, a fact that imposes to talk about "youths", in plural, rather than a singular one. Because it is a social construction, "the divisions between ages are arbitrary", says Bourdieu (1990: 163), and not natural, marking a distance from demographic studies, for example, which propose life stages defined exclusively from biological age and seek to standardize and reduce the social and cultural phenomenon to a numerical data. The Bourdieuan approach thus establishes the need to know the notions specific to the group being studied, that is, the boundaries with which the different generations are separated locally.

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1 Rio Grande is a rural town in the Ejido and Municipality of Tila, located six kilometers from the municipal seat, Tila. In the 2010 population census it registered 880 hbs. (878 from the town and 2 from outside). The natives are speakers of Chol and most also of Spanish, although with different levels of competence (INEGI, 2010).

Bourdieu also states that youths are defined in relational terms, as opposed to other age groups (children, adults, elderly) in the same society, and cannot be treated as a group in themselves. In this way, the constructivist perspective introduces the dimension of power inequalities: "In fact, the frontier between youth and old age in all societies is the object of struggle" (Bourdieu, 1990: 163). In the rural society in question, for example, inheritance of land, arrangements for the organization of agricultural work and enjoyment of its products, as well as the decision on their children's marriage, among others, are elements that are disputed on the generational border between adults and young people. Bourdieu adds that in societies there is a consensus on the practices and behaviour of the various generations. "When the 'sense of limit' is lost, conflicts arise over age limits, the limits between ages, where the transmission of power and privileges between generations is at stake" (Bourdieu, 1990: 173).

Likewise, the French author emphasizes that youths have a historical character because they are not a given reality but respond to specific and changing social conditions for the society in question. In addition, they are not homogeneous; there are differences between different youths -urban and rural, of social class, for example-, but also internally it is possible to recognize differences of gender, economic, degree of schooling, of consumption, among others.

Maya Lorena Pérez Ruiz points out about the characterization of this social group the following:

So, to "denaturalize" the young, it is necessary to accept that it is not a "universal and homogeneous descriptor" (Reguillo, 2004), nor a data that is exhausted in the biological accumulation of years; neither can it be reduced to a lifestyle associated only to a form of globalized consumption. It is, on the contrary, a social classification that supposes the existence of a complex system of differences, whose articulation grants precise characteristics, contents, limits and sense to the continent of "being young" (Pérez Ruiz, 2011: 72).

Starting from the analytical perspective presented above, in this article I examine the case of the Chol locality, Rio Grande, to trace the configuration of young people groups around two processes: the centrality of agriculture in peasant reproduction, on the one hand, and the new spaces created by the educational institutions (the training of bilingual teachers and the training of university students), on the other.

## AN AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

By ethnographic references I have been able to locate that Rio Grande has been settled in the current site since the end of the 19th century. It was a dispersed settlement of *milperías*, which practiced a subsistence economy based on corn and bean crops. Very important aspects of peasant social organization were defined around self-sufficiency agriculture, based on gender, age, and kinship (Imberton, 2016). In the domestic group, decisions about agricultural work and the distribution of its fruits were a male prerogative (even if women and children worked in agriculture). Land ownership fell to men in general and inheritance was arranged mainly from father to son.

In this patriarchal society, it was the duty of the father, the head of the family, occasionally with the participation of his wife, to arrange their children's marriage, even without the consent or knowledge of the future spouses. Transition between generations was marked by marriage (at a very early age), although the transfer of plots was made when the son had already formed his own family, and had a wife and one or two children. This marked the passage from child/young man to adult man: children inherited the land from their father, a situation that allowed them to reproduce economically, as long as they had recognized and abided by the father's authority. The aspirations of most of these new families were to lead a peasant life.

Throughout the 20th century, Rio Grande was immersed in social, economic and political transformations at the regional, national and international levels, as part of the processes of modernization and globalization. In 1934, as a result of the impulse to the Agrarian Reform, the occupied lands were recognized by means of a common endowment. Thus, the Ejido of Tila was created, Tila was settled as the capital, and a new form of relationship between State and Chol peasants was established (Imberton, 2016).

More relevant was the introduction of coffee cultivation in their plots (in the 1940s), as they slowly began to participate in the market economy and to allocate more land to this crop. This caused greater pressure on the common limited lands, and coupled with population growth and agricultural crises at the national and international level, it was necessary for many to seek other forms of survival.

Towards the 1970s and 1980s, migration (temporary or permanent) to nearby towns or cities intensified in Rio Grande; some trades were developed (bricklaying, baking, clothing making, among others), as well as forms of wage-earning work in the locality. Small businesses were also established (groceries and clothing). The State was present through various development institutions, and also through the school, since at the same time as the school was founded, the training of bilingual teachers began. The town had access to electricity in the 1980's and slowly the first household appliances

(TV and refrigerators) were introduced. These changes led to greater socio-economic differentiation at the local level.

These transformations shaped the loss of agriculture centrality, which in the following decades has been reaffirmed, and has necessarily affected the generational situation. If, before young people were tied to the domestic group and to the paternal authority to inherit the plot of land that would allow them to reproduce as farmers, now some young people obtain economic income by working in other towns and cities that allow them to earn, sometimes, more than their farmer father. They also have different aspirations for their future. For many of them, rural life is no longer attractive: they master Spanish, in addition to Chol, which makes it possible to live outside of town; they have achieved upper secondary education in nearby towns and cities, and wish to settle there by engaging in other activities; they establish relationships on their own initiative; they make use of digital technology (cell phones, internet, pay TV, among others) and aspire to new forms of consumption (personal care, music, spending time with friends).

This has blurred the previously accepted generational transit, which had to do with marriage and plot inheritance. Young people now have greater decision-making power in choosing a partner, and if they earn an income on their own, they can "negotiate" different agreements with the father in terms of contributing financial resources to the household in exchange of not participating in agricultural work, dressing differently or listening to different music without being scolded or criticized, among other things. It is in this context that higher level studies have become an option for young people in Rio Grande, and that it is important to discuss how young people's reduced dependence on parental authority (and on agriculture) has affected their aspiration to become university students.

## CONTEXT AND HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF SCHOOL

The arrival of the school to Rio Grande in the 1960s was part of important national and international processes related to the implementation of public policies on education that had strong political and economic repercussions. The post-revolutionary governments identified the conditions of severe backwardness of the Mexican rural environment, from the socio-economic to the educational aspects, and a series of measures to overcome it that were applied differently in several regions of the country was proposed<sup>2</sup>. It was

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2 Primary education was declared nationally obligatory in 1934, although its implementation was not immediate or equal throughout the country. See the very interesting work of Stephen Lewis for the period from 1910 to 1945 in Chiapas, prior to the emergence of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (NIIP).

also recognized that it was the indigenous populations that were living the greatest backwardness in the rural environment, the so-called "indigenous problem", and that it required the decisive and committed intervention of the State to correct it for the well-being of the nation.

In this way, and mainly in relation to other Latin American governments that were experiencing similar situations, in the middle of the 20th century the indigenist policy was developed that derived in 1948 in Mexico in the creation of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (NIIP) as an operative instrument<sup>3</sup>. This institute sought to make the Spanish-speaking population in order to guarantee -through a series of actions- their acculturation and insertion in the national economic and social processes. Several anthropologists participated in the design and implementation of this program<sup>4</sup>. Although the objectives and goals were readjusted during its implementation, it was initially proposed to train local promoters with leadership skills to encourage social and cultural change among indigenous groups, i.e., comprehensive community development, with a view to integration into the national mestizo society. While the promoters were being trained, they had to create the necessary spaces for NIIP to operate its programs (agricultural production, poultry, education, health, among others) within rural localities. After receiving further school training, they could become elementary school bilingual teachers, confident that by sharing teachers and students the same language, the teaching-learning process would be more effective.

As we will see below, one of the consequences of this policy -besides the strictly educational ones- was to foster during the 1970's to the 1990's the emergence of a new local leadership (with ideological, economic, and political reach) embodied in the region's cultural promoters and bilingual teachers. During this period, indigenous action was expanded and strengthened in the different indigenous regions of Chiapas.

In this case, it is necessary to acknowledge the educational situation in Tila, the municipal capital, and its relationship with the surrounding indigenous localities, particularly Rio Grande<sup>5</sup>. Throughout the 20th century, several institutions participated in the local educational processes (federal/

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3 In 1940 the First Inter-American Indigenous Congress was held in Patzcuaro, Michoacan, which gave rise to the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (III) in Mexico that same year, and in 1948 to the NIIP as its subsidiary. The III Convention was initially ratified by El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador and the United States, with the function of coordinating indigenous policies at the continental level. National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, [http://www.cdi.gob.mx/difusion/19abril/historia\\_interamericano.pdf](http://www.cdi.gob.mx/difusion/19abril/historia_interamericano.pdf), accessed September 7, 2018.

4 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Julio de la Fuente and Alfonso Caso Andrade (archaeologist), among the most important.

5 Historically, Tila has been inhabited mostly by Chol peasants. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, foreign capital coffee plantations were established in the region, incor-

state; monolingual/bilingual), and the relations between them at very tense and conflictive moments: the State Education System (monolingual); the literacy teachers, known as "community teachers" hired by the Tila Municipal Council (Pérez, 2007); and on behalf of the federal system were the Secretariat of Public Education, the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (NIIP), and the National Service of Bilingual Promoters and Teachers of the General Directorate of Out-of-School Education for Indigenous Affairs (DGEEMI).

The first school in Tila was founded in 1930, belonging to the monolingual state system (Pérez, 2007: 61) and aimed mainly at local Ladino population. Teaching was in Spanish and at first literacy was its main task. Shortly afterwards, a local literacy program and literacy centers were implemented to serve some nearby Chol towns. According to some inhabitants of Rio Grande, around 1955, before the official school was established in town, "gratified" teachers arrived<sup>6</sup>. These were paid in kind by the peasants, although their activities were very irregular. Students had to contribute daily with fruit, eggs and other food, since without this contribution they could not enter the classroom; they also had to dress according to certain rules<sup>7</sup>. An older man recalled with sadness that as a child he sat outside the classroom, trying to capture as much as possible of the teacher's teaching because he never had the conditions to enter and participate. At this time there were about 25 families living scattered around the territory, which made it difficult for them to go to school as well.

In 1960, the official school was founded in Rio Grande, Federal Rural Justo Sierra Elementary School, with a teacher to attend from first to fourth grade. At the beginning, only eight-year-olds and young people up to the age of twenty participated in a single group -"still from *nagua*"<sup>8</sup>- although attendance

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porating many peasants as hired workers, while others continued to live in their milperías. Starting in the 1930s, merchants from San Cristóbal de Las Casas, who eventually came to do business, began to settle permanently in the municipal capital, Tila. They slowly took over land and houses in the capital, and began to dispute the municipal public offices of the Chol peasants.

In the 1970s, the local classification terms were "peasants" and "merchants". Peasants were the original inhabitants of the area and Chol speakers, while the merchants were outsiders, of Spanish speakers. The latter were also referred to as *kaxlanes* (Spanish speakers) or *ladinos* (understood as a cultural category that describes non-indigenous people), but the denomination predominated because of their commercial activity. (See Imberton 2002 and 2016). Later the category "indigenous" was introduced to refer to Chol peasants and Chol speakers in general.

In this paper, I will use the category *ladino* to refer to people who do not speak Chol because it is the most used in the region of study.

6 I have not found any more information about "rewarded" teachers in the literature about the region. Pérez (2007) records the existence in the 1930's of "literacy centers" and "community teachers" in Tila and nearby towns, but not in Rio Grande, and does not speak of "gratified" ones.

7 Children and young people were checked for underwear.

8 It refers to the traditional skirt of local women, the *nagua*, which is currently worn only by a few old women.



was low and sporadic. Many adults now comment that as children they were afraid to leave their homes in the *milperías* to go to the classroom and were also afraid of the teachers.

There is very eloquent mention of Teacher Augusto Vázquez Pérez, who organized and promoted the construction of the school. He began the work in 1963 and concluded it in 1968, for which he counted on the population's economic contributions of the. He managed the support in a very skilful and ingenious way, according to a peasant. He summoned about 10 heads of family to present the school project, but they all concluded that it was impossible to do so because they did not have the economic resources. However, he insisted that it was feasible. This group worked on the construction of the airstrip on Rio Grande land and received "juicy" salaries for their activity<sup>9</sup>. Vázquez Pérez then proposed that instead of benefiting only some, all heads of households would "pull together" in airport jobs and donate part of that income to the school. And so it was done, in addition people contributed work: they brought stone, they made lime with small rocks (burned and crushed), they looked for trunks for the beams, among other activities. Teacher Augusto hired a bricklayer and brought materials from Tuxtla Gutiérrez by plane. The work took about five years<sup>10</sup>. It must have been a long time before the peasants gave importance to their children's schooling, which later became mandatory.

But in the seventies and eighties, disputes arose in Tila between the two official education systems: the state and the federal. The competing groups, both from the monolingual Spanish-language education system, were made up of Ladinos who disputed the "appropriation" of new schools that were emerging, of teacher positions and of land donated by the people for this purpose, among others. There were even violent confrontations between them.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, around 1972, the conditions for the emergence of bilingual education (Chol/Spanish) in this region began. The National Institute of Indigenous Peoples and the la General Directorate of Out-of-School Education for Indigenous Affairs of the Secretariat of Public Education, through the Indigenous Development and Improvement Brigade, initially developed activities for the training of "Bilingual Cultural Promoters" in Chol and Spanish.

9 Access by land to this region was extremely difficult, so coffee farm owners used small planes and rustic airstrips to bring out the production.

10 Currently this classroom is still standing, although the school facilities have grown a lot in number of classrooms, in addition there is a roofed sports field, an orchard, among others.

11 These conflicts are part of a period of heated political mobilization in the state of Chiapas between the two teachers' unions: the ruling National Education Workers' Union (SNTE) and the opposition National Education Workers' Coordination (CNTE).

In addition to the disputes between teachers (shopkeepers or children of Ladino shopkeepers) in the state and federal systems, bilingual teachers were also involved, who used their Chol speaking status to express what they considered to be their legitimate aspirations.

### *Bilingual teachers*

In the 1970s, young Chol people from the region, as well as young speakers of different indigenous languages from other regions of the country, were invited by official institutions such as the General Directorate of Out-of-School Education for Indigenous Affairs of the Secretariat of Public Education and the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples to train as "Bilingual Cultural Promoters" -in this case, in Chol and Spanish- with the only requirement of having basic knowledge of reading and writing<sup>12</sup>. Very few had completed elementary education, others had only second grade. According to Pérez (2007), they received a brief training of several weeks to work as development promoters in the localities, dealing with productive issues (gardens and vegetables, animal husbandry), and health issues. They were also asked to conduct population censuses in the assigned communities.

A central aspect of the training sought to "raise awareness" of the promoter, so that he would acquire a deep commitment to the work he had to do, living together in communities, performing diverse functions, beyond classroom teaching, but with the purpose of improving local living conditions. They used the puppet theatre to transmit their social messages (Pérez, 2007).

Young promoters selected began their work with 6-month contracts. A decade later, those who continued their training in normal schools or equivalent won places as bilingual teachers, depending on the training levels achieved (Pérez, 2007)<sup>13</sup>. During this period, 21 bilingual teachers were trained in Rio Grande, 20 men and one woman.

But recently trained Chol promoters, who belong to the federal system of the General Directorate of Out-of-School Education for Indigenous Affairs, managed in several locations to get the support of the peasants to promote the creation of the Chol-Spanish bilingual system. At first, peasants of Rio Grande disapproved the proposal because they wanted their Chol speaking children to learn Spanish and for the school to prepare them to function in

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12 The DGEEMI was established in Tila in 1972, the regional director of education was the anthropologist Manuel Coello Hernández (Pérez, 2007: 62). NIIP only stayed in Tila for six months, so its impact was less, and then it moved to Salto de Agua (Agudo, 2005).

13 At that time, young teachers were guaranteed a place when they graduated.

the urban Ladino environment, but they finally accepted<sup>14</sup>. They requested that bilingual system teachers were Chol promoters, which brought the contest to another point. There was confrontation between the monolingual and bilingual systems, and then conflicts were presented between Ladinos and indigenous people, respectively.

Many peasants in Rio Grande began to see teaching in the bilingual system as a space in which their children and grandchildren -increasingly less able to devote themselves to agriculture because of land scarcity- could obtain stable, well-paid employment with various benefits, and without having to leave the region, as was the case with migrants. Ladino teachers in the monolingual system (state and federal), on the other hand, saw those in the bilingual system as unfair competition, which would limit the number of schools they could run, places and resources in general.

In several places in the region, Chol peasants began to question the monolingual Ladino teachers. They argued that they missed classes a lot and did not cover the whole week but only 3 or 4 days. In addition, they said that they did not know Chol language and could not explain it well to students, which was reflected in low performance; they also claimed they had poor relations with the parents and the community in general. In several villages, monolingual teachers were expelled and replaced by bilingual teachers. In the period 1976-1988 there were about 60 bilingual teachers in the Tila region, but by the 1990s the number had risen to over 200 (Pérez, 2007: 66). In Rio Grande's case, the monolingual school was changed to the bilingual system and took the name of "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz" Bilingual Elementary School. In 1992, the donation of physical space where the school is located was legalized.

Bilingual cultural promoters -who have already become bilingual teachers- occupied a privileged position in Rio Grande compared to most peasants. Economically, they had a regular, much higher, fortnightly income than the other inhabitants. Over time, several of them began to invest in different businesses, such as commerce (small grocery stores, clothing, carpentry) and transportation, mainly in open competition with ladino merchants of the capital. In addition, their income allowed them to maintain a higher level of consumption, which stands out among other farmers (cement houses, cars, household appliances, fashionable clothes, children enrolled in university, among others).

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14 Agudo (2005) describes that in the case of El Limar, in the lowlands of Tila, at first peasants supported the creation of the bilingual system, but later opposed it, arguing that it was for small and backward communities. There, the opinion was widespread that the bilingual system was inferior to monolingual systems, as it promoted "extracurricular" education. After several years they accepted the creation of the school, which is now the largest in terms of students.

But they also stood out in other ways. Thanks to their command of Spanish, their knowledge of the official bureaucracy and their experience in urban Ladino environment, bilingual teachers began to participate actively in the conduct of local affairs and acted as intermediaries between official institutions and peasants. They also came into contact with political organizations, unions and religious associations, among others, and developed strong leaderships among local population<sup>15</sup>.

Little by little, bilingual teachers acquired a position of exceptional relevance and prestige in the peasant world, and even more so, considering that they were very young men and women. People who previously had authority and recognition -"principals", butlers, and healers- were adults and elders. For the first time, young people carried out an activity that allowed them to climb the social ladder at a dizzying rate and occupy a privileged space.

However, I believe that this fact did not have such an important impact on generational relations. Agriculture was then the main activity for most domestic groups, teachers (men) received land from their fathers<sup>16</sup> and marriages were established in the traditional way. Although they acquired prestige and an unusual relevant position, which allows us to talk about social and economic mobility, this did not translate at that time into notorious generational differences that questioned agreements and practices in force in peasant reproduction.

### *University students*

As a result of these processes, people of Rio Grande began to value the importance of education for the future of their children. However, training programs for bilingual teachers, with a guaranteed place at the end of their studies, came to an end in the 1990's. After this time, only about four young people who studied in different teacher training schools have been able to become bilingual teachers. Although that option was closed, many decided to continue their studies in middle school and high school, and others in university.

Beginning in the 1990's, the Mexican State promoted secondary and middle education at national level, in line with various international orga-

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15 In my opinion, the case of Río Grande differs from that of Tila (Pérez, 2007, Agudo, 2005) and from that described by Pineda (1994) of Los Altos de Chiapas. Although local teachers accumulated material goods and prestige, the vast majority continued to collaborate in an organized manner in community affairs, actively seeking to protect some of the common interests (for example, in relation to the privatization of the common, which they radically opposed). No 'cultural caciques' emerged, as Pineda describes for Los Altos, nor did they benefit abusively from business and contacts as in Tila (Pérez, 2007).

16 Teachers who lived outside town had to hire local day laborers, often relatives, to work their plots, so as not to lose their common rights.

nizations (United Nations, among others), as a measure to combat poverty and inequality. During this period, number of schools in rural areas grew and the massification of these services began<sup>17</sup>. It is important to emphasize that in these schools there is no education focused on indigenous people, as there was before with the NIIP and the DGEEMI; education is in Spanish, and the contents are standardized nationally and internationally.

In Tila, several schools were opened: the Telesecundaria School 555 in Cantio (2 km away) was opened by the Secretariat of Public Education, and in 1991 the Colegio de Bachilleres #14 in Tila (6 km away) was opened by the Chiapas' State Government<sup>18</sup>. Education at both levels (middle school and high school) is in Spanish, and does not incorporate ethnic particularities. These two schools have been attended by the majority of students in Rio Grande and the levels of schooling of young people have increased notoriously. Many have been supported by government programs (*Oportunidades*, *Progres*a and now *Prospera*) aimed at the most impoverished sectors<sup>19</sup>.

In regard to university education, it was in 2003 that the first public intercultural universities were founded at the national level, sponsored by the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education of the Secretariat of Public Education and the state governments, aiming for bringing higher education closer to historically excluded populations, including indigenous or native peoples.<sup>20</sup> The first in Tila was founded in 2009. But, as I point out later, young people have attended public and private universities in the region, in other states and abroad.

Towards the end of the 20th century, social and labor options for young people were the following: continue working in agriculture, in those cases where the domestic group had common lands; emigrate temporarily or definitively to look for wage-earning work in services or agriculture; start some business in the village (transport, grocery store, clothing store, sale

17 If elementary school was declared obligatory in 1934, 59 years later, in 1993, middle school was made obligatory; then came the pre-school level in 2002 and the upper middle school (high school) in 2012. [https://www.inee.edu.mx/portalweb/informe2018/04\\_informe/capitulo\\_00.html](https://www.inee.edu.mx/portalweb/informe2018/04_informe/capitulo_00.html), accessed October 8, 2012.

18 The *Colegio de Bachilleres* is a decentralized public organization with presence in all states of the Mexican Republic

19 There has been no specific analytical follow-up of the resource's impact on the training of young university students in Rio Grande, although it is possible to state that most of the teachers' children did not have this full support, as a result of a local decision that sought to favor only the neediest. They generally received support for transportation only.

20 According to Dietz (2014), the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas provoked national debates about a new relationship between the State and the original populations, which proposed to transcend the NIIP's indigenous policies (both the integrationist principle, and the bilingual and bicultural one that also sought *Spanishization*) and to respond to the demands of indigenous organizations by emphasizing inter-culturality and diversity.

of nails and construction material); and undertake university studies, with the expectation of concluding a major that would allow them to find better-paid work, among the most important ones. Most have had to combine two or more of these activities and agriculture is no longer the only and main economic activity.

Young people who have opted for university training, interviews with them and their families have allowed me to access specific data, and at the same time to know how they made the decision to enter university and chose their career and educational establishment, what was the process of entry, the difficulties they faced, and their expectations regarding obtaining a university degree<sup>21</sup>. While I was doing this research, more than half of them were doing their studies, that is why it is not possible to comment on what percentage of graduates have obtained work in their field or in another, or if they are unemployed, underemployed, among others.

I registered 51 students (36 men and 15 women); most of them are pursuing a career and a few have already graduated. Although they generally study in Chiapas and Tabasco universities (public and private), there have also been local young people in Michoacán, Sinaloa and Cuba<sup>22</sup>.

According to young people interviewed, university and majors are not so much chosen for affinity or thematic interest. They generally look for the closest and least expensive options, or those where they know someone in the study center or city. A few have attended the Bachelor's Fair in Ocosingo to learn about the regional programs. In the end the decision depends on having passed the entrance exam; many try two or three times before passing. Among women, the following careers are presented: language and culture, education, nursing, social work, history, psychology, administration. For men, the following are included more than women: education, civil engineering, computer engineering, nursing, architecture, social work, physical rehabilitation, clinical bio-analysis, administration, biochemical engineering, medicine, electrical engineering, and law.

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21 The information presented includes up to 2016, when the investigation ended. I would like to thank the university student Sofía Martínez Vázquez for her important support in obtaining data on the group in question, as well as for having facilitated several interviews.

22 The following universities have registered:

PUBLIC: Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas, Yajalón, Chiapas; Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, SCLC; Escuela Normal Indígena Intercultural Bilingüe "Jacinto Canek", Zinacantán, Chiapas.

Instituto Tecnológico de Villahermosa, Tabasco; Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco; Instituto Superior de los Ríos, Tabasco.

Universidad Autónoma Intercultural de México, Sinaloa; Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Michoacán; Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de La Habana, Cuba.

PRIVATE: Sistema Educativo Universitario Azteca –SEUAT, Yajalón; Universidad de Bachajón, Chiapas; Colegio Universitario Versalles, Yajalón, Chiapas; Universidad Tecnológica de la Selva, Ocosingo; Universidad Pablo Guardado Chávez, Tuxtla Gutiérrez; Universidad del Valle de Grijalva, Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

As for their expectations, when I asked what their reasons were for entering college, many of them said that they wanted to be teachers first and foremost: "Since I was a child, I always had a vision of being someone in life, a teacher". Others stated: "I like to teach and help others"; "I wanted to be a teacher"; "education is very important for life"; "I see my dad (bilingual teacher) as an example"; "my dream was to be a teacher", "studying was my goal and objective since elementary school". With a few exceptions, the vast majority have had this aspiration and hold bilingual teachers in high esteem.

Their narratives also include assessments of their university education. One young woman said that it was during high school that she decided to study psychology, out of a desire to "prepare, to get ahead". One young man mentioned that he planned to study at university "because of economic necessity", but also "because he had more knowledge". Another emphasized "going out to look for opportunities, in cities there are more job opportunities". Another commented that since he was a child he knew he would study medicine, and dreamed that "after finishing high school he would take a plane straight to university", with modern medical equipment and staying in some important city working on relevant projects. In general, young people think about their individual future -to prosper, advance, improve, and learn- more than about making contributions within the locality.

Some mentioned as reasons to study the taste for "knowing other places", learning to move around in big towns and cities, "not being afraid to travel", although in several of the interviews these same situations are presented as obstacles during their stay abroad.

A few attributed their decision to significant people close to them. For example, one indicated that he studied because "my mom didn't want me to be a farmer. I'm going to send you to university," he said, as he is the only son among four sisters. Another boy said, "I wasn't planning to study, but my little brother encourage me". And another boy did it because his brother died: "I had the obligation to study, because he had the dream to continue studying".

Among the main obstacles to the formation of young university students, I place those of a financial nature. Although most of them have studied in public institutions (which generally require some payment), all of them are located outside town, which involves various expenses in transportation, housing, and food, among the most important ones. A relevant criterion for university selection has to do with the distance that separates it from home. It should be noted that those who study at private institutions are mainly the teachers' children, who are more likely to pay for these expenses<sup>23</sup>.

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23 37% of all registered university students are children of bilingual teachers.

But everyone is looking for scholarships that to a greater or lesser extent, will lighten the economic burden. Several of the students have entered programs of the National Council for the Promotion of Education (CONAFE), in which for each year as a preschool or elementary school teacher they receive two or three years of scholarship for further studies<sup>24</sup>. Others have obtained scholarships from the National Higher Education Scholarship Program (PRONABES) or from their centers of study. Many have worked temporarily during their studies to pay for their stay and expenses, including those on scholarships, as the amounts received are insufficient for them. It should be noted that, as a whole, not all of them face similar situations in terms of the resources available to them, since, for example, one young woman commented that she ate nothing but bread for weeks, while another young man who studied in a big city said he felt uncomfortable because his classmates had "cell phones, laptops, good school supplies and clothes", and he did not. There are several cases of students dropping out of school soon after they start due to lack of resources.

Another recurring difficulty is that young people do not pass universities' entrance exams. Schooling received at elementary, middle and high school levels does not guarantee that they will have a sufficient level; some do not even reach the required averages to begin the process. As a result, many young people do not enter the university they have selected, but rather the one where they have been approved, and study a different major from the one they had originally chosen. One wanted to take the entrance exam in Mexico City but, he said, "I was afraid to go to faraway places".

For the same reason, there are young people who fail some subjects and desist from continuing, arguing several elements: they do not like the majors; teachers are absent a lot and/or do not explain well; the second-chance exams are expensive; they say there is corruption, because teachers "sell" the grades and only approve those who can pay.

Although young people interviewed had family support, as we will see later, it is not always easy to convince parents of the convenience of going out to study. This is particularly true for women, who parents think they will "marry far away" and not return to the village or "get pregnant" without

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24 Working at CONAFE is a frequent alternative among university students in Rio Grande and the region. This official institution brings together young people (16-29 years old) who have graduated from middle school, high school or higher education to train as leaders for community education. Their task is to teach preschool and primary school in rural areas, and in return the institution provides them with monthly financial support and training for their work. The attraction of this program for young people is that, at the end of their contract, CONAFE maintains this support for a period of 30 to 60 months so that they can study, as long as it is in schools recognized by the SEP. <https://www.gob.mx/conafe/articulos/quieres-participar-como-lider-para-la-educacion-comunitaria?idiom=es>, accessed on September 17, 2018.



them even knowing about the relationships they will have while they are studying. They also suffer from the fact that they will stop helping with domestic work. In the case of men, it is claimed that they will not help in field work or that far from family supervision they will "get into bad habits". Some mothers claim that they will be left alone.

The vast majority also find it difficult to live away from their locality and to get used to their new place of residence. They miss family and friends and do not always have contacts to help them when they arrive. One young woman said, "I forgot to study. I didn't want to be away from my family". Some talk about the fear of living in big cities, like Tuxtla Gutiérrez: "I was nervous. I didn't go out, I was locked in the room. I didn't know the transportation routes, I couldn't do teamwork because I didn't have a cell phone..." Others refer to the conditions of insecurity in Sinaloa, for example, where narcs, shootings and crime are always present. Or they point to climate conditions: the suffocating heat, and lack of recreational activities in towns like Balancán or Cunduacán, where "there is nothing to do".

All young people interviewed insisted and stressed that family support was essential for studying at university, because without it, it would simply not have been possible. Support is provided in different ways. In money, which is the most required, and which requires the domestic group to carry out specific activities to obtain it: for example, sending one or more of its members to work temporarily (as a wage-earner in agriculture, as a domestic employee); opening a small business that allows them to generate some cash (selling home-baked bread, sweets); selling part of the agricultural production to cover expenses and emergencies, among others. Children are also supported with food (tortillas, tamales, corn) and clothing, some family members visit the students' place of residence so that they do not feel alone and to provide care when they are sick. Family members are also involved in local bureaucratic procedures for admission or scholarships, among others.

Elisa's case<sup>25</sup> is useful to comment on the trajectories that students present in their university careers, highlighting elements that have to do with structural conditions and others that are random.

Elisa was 33 years old when she was interviewed, her father and mother are farmers, and she has 4 siblings (3 brothers and 1 sister). She is single. She and her sister both attended university, but her brothers did not. She finished her high school education at Cobach #14 in Tila, where she had the *Progres*

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25 Fake name

scholarship for the last few years; her parents later supported her. During this time she wanted to study psychology, "but couldn't" for financial reasons, so she spent a year at the family's house, helping out with housework. Then she entered the National Council for the Promotion of Education (Conafe), where she worked for two years with the purpose of obtaining a scholarship to cover her education for six years. With this support (1,500 pesos per month approximately), she studied computer science for two years in Yajalón. It was at this time that the Intercultural University was opened there and she decided to study Language and Culture. To support herself financially during her studies, she worked every summer in a clothing store first, and then in a shoe store in Villahermosa, Tabasco. From there she obtained resources for her computer, materials and to pay for her graduation. She finished her four-year degree, and a month after finishing her studies she competed for a position as a primary school teacher and won. She started as a teacher and now she is the principal of a school near Tabasco. Although her dream was not to be a teacher, she is very happy and satisfied with the job and position she currently holds.

In Elisa's case, it is striking that in a peasant family it was precisely the two female daughters who undertook university studies, with the consent and support of the family, and not the boys, which is more common. Bilingual teachers' daughters tend to go to university more than those of peasants. It was precisely this condition that allowed them to benefit from the *Progreso* scholarship when they studied for their bachelor's degree, since by decision of the local Assembly teachers' children were excluded, considering they have more economic resources to cover the expenses.

The path that Elisa followed trying to "find" her career is the most frequent: giving up the subject of interest because it is not viable due to costs; staying at home for a while after finishing high school to evaluate the possibilities of paying for university and to see options. It is not so common, however, to try one major before defining another, as this involves very high costs.

The fact that Elisa has obtained a full-time position as a teacher as soon as she finished her studies is exceptional. The vast majority has returned to home (domestic work, for women, or agriculture in the case of men), and eventually is employed in temporary jobs (as interviewers at the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the National Electoral Institute (INE), covering teacher internships, in construction, waiting for a stable job opportunity to present itself.

The situation of university students in the 21st century is more diverse than that of bilingual promoters and teachers decades ago. Since agriculture has lost its centrality, peasant reproduction is no longer the condition of all domestic groups. Although agricultural work provides products and income to many families, other productive activities complement it or have already

displaced and replaced it in importance. This fact has allowed young people -with higher levels of education, command of Spanish and experience of knowledge of the urban environment- to harbor different expectations from those of the previous generation, and to move outside of town in searching for work and different life options. Among them are, without a doubt, university students. However, the possibility of studying in university seems to be conditioned to having the support of the domestic group, a fact that makes the individual's decision subordinate to the father's approval (or father and mother, in some cases).

### FINAL THOUGHTS

In this section I propose to close with a comparison of the two moments where young people were involved in educational processes, and of the corresponding generational relations. First, it is important to highlight the difference in terms of gender in both periods. At the beginning, there was only one woman among bilingual teachers (21 in total), while now they make up almost a third (15 of 51) of the whole. This indicates that female school attendance is more acceptable, even if it means moving temporarily from the locality, and that the teacher's job is well accepted. I think it is also related to the delay in marriage ages, which is now more common among women from 15 to 16 years old.

Another relevant aspect has to do with the symbolic value of the position or grade acquired. Among cultural promoters/bilingual teachers, the dedication and commitment they acquired before the "community" stands out. Training received, in accordance with INI and DGEEMI education policies, based on their indigenous status, was aimed not so much at training them for their own personal benefit, but rather at enabling them to manage social change and development in their locality. This allowed them to enjoy great approval and prestige in their communities, and fostered the emergence of leaderships as they went on to occupy important positions and had great weight in local decisions. Farmers and teachers now remember the "mystique" that surrounded their performance, and how they assumed responsibilities convinced that their work was a relevant contribution to community welfare.

Now, however, in order to enter university, they must have completed at least 12 years of study (elementary, middle and high school), with sufficient grades to apply to study centers and pass entrance exams. Some of them point out that their situation is harder than that of bilingual teachers, since they have to spend many more years studying, and even then they will not immediately get a teaching position, nor is it certain that they will find employment. The most difficult test is that they have to look for work

on their own. They use Internet, for which they must go to the head office since there is no service in town; they go personally to institutions with a presence in head offices (Inegi, among others); they ask friends or relatives who live in nearby towns to look for calls, etc. Several graduates are unemployed or with temporary jobs, and when a place is available, they all go to compete among themselves. Many combine their studies with agricultural work, even when they have already graduated. Or they are employed in activities that do not require the training they have: business dependents, porters, agricultural work, among others.

Another element that should be highlighted is that bilingual teachers have gained a lot of prestige at the local and regional level through their profession/work. As for university students, it is too early to give an opinion because many have not yet finished their studies. But there are comments and contrasting judgments that show how these young people are in the spotlight. Some parents stress the importance of university education to achieve social mobility; others dismiss it mockingly by pointing to cases of unemployed graduates who work in agriculture but made their parents spend too much to finance their studies. Students defend their decision by saying that they "will not stay at home waiting" for someone to offer them work, but will go as far as necessary, but they also recognize that it will not be as easy as they thought.

In terms of generational relations, I want to highlight the differences in both periods. In the first period, agriculture was still the activity that governed local peasant life, and land ownership and control of family work demarcated relations between young people and adults. Fathers decided when their children should marry and when to give them the corresponding plots of land. Marriage unions were between children aged 11-14 years, and from that moment on they were considered adults with the consequent responsibilities. These understandings were not altered during the period of the bilingual teachers.

By the second moment, the situation had changed. Agriculture has lost importance to other economic activities, and children do not depend entirely on land inheritance for their survival. They develop activities that generate income for them (salaried work in agriculture, services, among others) and some related to the greater schooling they have received. Marriages are often preceded by courtships at will; sometimes unions are "runaways", which allows them to choose their partner and, later, plan their reproduction and spacing of children. Marital unions are between 16 years old teenagers.

Local perception of today youth's greater independence reinforces the observations and investigations that I was able to make in Rio Grande and that allow me to affirm that this group has greater decision-making power

over their lives than previous generations, although in the case of university students the situation is different and more complex because they require family support to pursue their studies. Even though they receive some official support or scholarships from educational institutions, the domestic group is fundamental to achieve this training.

It is not yet possible to know what the future holds for young university students in Rio Grande, whether there will be jobs in their professional field or in other activities different from the degree they have, nor whether they will have access to the social, economic and prestige mobility that bilingual teachers previously enjoyed and that motivated them to train as professionals. But the circumstances described in this article suggest that their road will be more arduous and complicated than it was for teachers in the previous century.

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