An Intercultural Education for Mexico: Career and Contributions of Sylvia Schmelkes

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces Sylvia Schmelkes's contributions in the field of intercultural education. An outstanding Mexican educational researcher, Schmelkes was General Coordinator of the Intercultural and Bilingual General Coordination (GCIBE) at the Mexican Ministry of Public Education from its inception in 2001 until 2007. This article provides a perspective on interculturality and a brief overview of the Mexican context as it has been marked by political transition preceded by the Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas. The article then describes Schmelkes's approach and her most significant contributions to the work of the GCIBE. We argue that Schmelkes's main contribution was her commitment to building bridges between the research findings, the Indigenous demands contained in the San Andrés agreements, and the Mexican state. The depth of the challenges faced by Indigenous education in Mexico, and the extent of racism in the country were some of the challenges faced by her direction.

Understanding our country as culturally diverse necessarily entails the construction of a new relationship with the Indigenous peoples based on respect and the conviction that Indigenous communities can prosper by creating their own identities. This requires providing open spaces that encourage full participation of Indigenous peoples, who are aware of being different, in the social and political life. Sylvia Schmelkes (2005, p. 91)[1]

In this article, we provide an overview of Professor Sylvia Schmelkes's career, with a particular focus on her contributions to intercultural education (IE) during her time as General Coordinator of Intercultural and Bilingual General Coordination (GCIBE) at the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (2001–2007). After discussing the political nature of IE and the relevance it acquired in the last third of the past century in Latin America,

we will outline Schmelkes's biographical and professional career. We will then address some distinguishing features of Schmelkes's position as a researcher and political analyst regarding the problem of Indigenous and IE in Mexico. This will inform our examination of the contributions she made as GCIBE. During this period she was responsible for designing proposals, programs, and projects of IE policy, both directed to the Indigenous population in particular and to the Mestizo[2] population in general.

In addition to consulting the available documentary sources, in preparing this essay we conducted an in-depth interview with Sylvia Schmelkes, which allowed us to deepen our understanding of those aspects of her work that we consider relevant. Some fragments of this interview will be used throughout the text. We approach the writing of this essay cognizant of our close relationship with and appreciation of Sylvia Schmelkes, with whom we worked as partners at the Center for Studies in Education, A.C. (CEE), the first non-governmental institution dedicated to educational research in Mexico. At the CEE we did research together for over 10 years, and since then we have maintained a personal relationship with Schmelkes. The critical discussion in this essay reflects our sense of respect and admiration for her contributions and her commitment to education in Mexico.

CONCEPTUALIZING INTERCULTURALITY IN THE MEXICAN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Stefano Sartorello (2009) considers interculturality a *signifier* that acquires multiple meanings in relation to the social perspective from which it is defined and from the subjects who build it. As a signifier, interculturality cannot be understood as a neutral concept, but as a concept full of historically and politically produced meaning, which is why the definition of interculturality entails taking a political, social, and cultural stand on social reality. Sartorello identifies two poles of interpretation and contrasts these approaches. In the first, which is consistent with the neoliberal model of the nation-state, interculturality contributes to the subordinate assimilation of Indigenous groups and others who are traditionally excluded from public policies.

The second interpretation, which is critical of the neoliberal perspective, conceives of interculturality and bilingual IE as a means for minority and subordinate cultural groups to expand and contribute to a transformation of the world. "This means that it conceives intercultural education not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from its political dimension demanding forms of increased participatory and inclusive democracy and citizenship" (Sartorello, 2009, pp. 78–79). A similar distinction is made by Williamson (2004), for whom

there is no single view of multicultural education; in the same framework of the cultural and social differentiation, inequality and discrimination, there are ideo-

logical and theoretical variations ranging from a conservative perspective (passive tolerance, coexistence, simple acknowledgement of diversity) to a critical perspective (transforming contexts that generate inequality and discrimination from the difference). (p. 26)

The two views described by Sartorello and Williamson are prevalent throughout Latin America, which is inhabited by more than 29 million Indigenous people belonging to 665 different groups located in 23 countries (UNICEF, 2010). Yet, it was not until the mid-1970s that the notion of interculturality arose due to a project of Indigenous education in Venezuela (López, 2001).

López (2001) points out that the appearance of interculturality mobilized the discussion about the problems of exclusion of Indigenous societies, which are starting to play a major role on the regional political agenda, as an Indigenous movement is beginning to stir the Latin American consciousness. In this context, interculturality arises as an alternative to the homogenizing effects of miscegenation and informs proposals for Indigenous organizations, mainly, but not exclusively, related to education. Since the 1970s, many Latin American governments have incorporated the multicultural character of their nations in their constitutions and adopted an intercultural discourse.

However, some countries have engaged the notion of interculturality merely as a way to look good for international bodies and to appease internal pressure groups. According to Sartorello (2009), "the recurring use of the term interculturality in public speeches transforms it into a mere slogan, into a rhetorical figure which refers to a utopia but not to a reality or actuality" (p. 81). In the case of Mexico, there is no doubt that the attitude that has prevailed until now has been that of seeking to assimilate and to control Indigenous groups. Notwithstanding this, the fact remains that in Mexico there is no unified national culture, but rather a heterogeneous combination of assorted social ways of life, often contradictory with one another. One of the main sources of such cultural difference stems from the different way in which various groups have related historically with the Indigenous civilizations of Mesoamerica (Bonfil, 1994). For instance, according to Villoro (1998), the war for independence required the participation of Indigenous peoples. To this end, Creole and Mestizo populations forged an idealized image of the pre-Columbian past, which they used in their struggle against the European domination, but which produced a vision of a country inhabited by two different "cultures" at odds with and antagonistic to each other.

The outcome of this constructed vision was the segregation of Indigenous populations. Indigenous people were submitted to a tutelary regime and suffered repression and deprivation both spiritually and socially. Spiritually, they were subject to a hasty and incomplete evangelization, formed by an external and simulated observance of Catholic practices. Socially, they were subject to laws that treated them as children and isolated them

from national life. This segregation of Indigenous people became an obstacle to nation-building, which implies an ideal unification (of origin, religion, language, desires, goals, and aspirations). Such an ideal is embodied in the Mestizo. The dispute between liberals and conservatives regarding the project of nation-building-oriented liberal efforts to integrate the Indigenous populations into the developing nation. Yet this meant that Indigenous people had to participate under the rule of the Mestizos, who positioned themselves as the representatives, both of the nation's unity impulse and its purposes.

During the 19th century, under a republican system that distinguished no castes, Indigenous people were considered equal before the law to any other citizen. However, as Montemayor (2000) states, under apparent equality, Indigenous people were left even less protected than during the colony. "The nineteenth century was one of the most intense periods for undermining the Indigenous territorial base. Mexican liberalism destroyed more communities in a century than the ones destroyed by Colonizers during three hundred years" (Montemayor, 2000, p. 65). Therefore, the paradox between formal juridical equality and actual social inequality facilitated that the emergence of Mestizos as the owners of large landed estates, or haciendas, a role that was fully developed in the decades before the Mexican Revolution.

The days before the 1910 revolution again witnessed the incorporation of Indigenous peasants into the struggle of the newly emerging industrial bourgeoisie against the landlords. Indigenous people were forced to play an agrarian role that required them to renounce their evolving identities, as Mestizos once again forced them to transform the symbolic distance that separated them. Therefore, the transformation of Indigenous communities into peasantry has to be understood, not as the abandonment of a way of social life that corresponds to Indigenous Mesoamerican civilization, but as a process that takes place in the ideological field, in which the dominant society succeeds in breaking the Indigenous communities' ethnic identity (Bonfil, 1994). The new regime required the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, expected to embrace Western liberalism, which required that they renounce their collective land ownership and the adoption of individual property. "It meant that they would be saved only when accepting liberal economic ideas and when joining a bourgeois' economic system; such would be the proper translation of the previous propositions" (Villoro, 1998, p. 222).

In light of these historical transitions, the last decade of the 20th century marked a turning point. On January 1, 1994, Mexico was shocked by the public appearance of an armed movement in the State of Chiapas, located in the south of the country. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, in Spanish), composed almost entirely of Indigenous peoples, rose up in arms under the banner of "labor, land, roof, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace" for all Mexicans,

whether Indigenous or not. After agreeing to a truce, in October 1995 the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) Government of President Ernesto Zedillo and the EZLN came to the negotiating table. Negotiations led to the signing of the so-called San Andrés agreements on the issue of "Indigenous rights and culture" in February 1996 in which authorities committed to recognizing the autonomy, self-determination, and self-management of Indigenous peoples.

Over the last decade, a complex redefinition of the relationships between the Mexican state and civil society, as well as between the Mestizo majority and the Indigenous minorities has begun. This process is based on the emergence of new ethnic-regional agents of which the EZLN constitutes the most visible aspect. According to Dietz (2009),

The autonomy program signed by the various community coalitions conceives itself as the response to the disappearance of the State as a subject of the economic and social development in the Indigenous regions and as a sign of the clear failure of corporately controlled assistance and Indigenous policies. Through the struggle for autonomy, the coalition of communities is gradually transformed not only into an important instance of intermediation, but also into a new level of political articulation that is being placed between the communities and the state. (p. 59)

In December 2000, Vicente Fox, the National Action Party candidate, was sworn in as president of Mexico, ending 7 decades of successive government by the PRI, an organization that had brought together the triumphant factions of the Mexican Revolution. The so-called political alternation gave rise to great expectations of change in the country. However, President Fox failed to support the proposed law expressing the San Andrés agreements. Instead, he let Congress approve a Law on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which was immediately rejected by the EZLN. Subsequently, the EZLN broke off talks with the government. In spite of his lack of commitment to the implementation of the agreements of San Andrés, the Fox government did take some steps to meet Indigenous demands. Among them was the installation of the GCIBE in 2001, which for the first time proposed intercultural education for the entire population and culturally appropriate education for Indigenous people at all educational levels. To appreciate the importance of this event, it is necessary to note that according to the 2010 census data, 15.7 million Mexicans identify themselves as Indigenous. In Mexico there are 68 different ethno-linguistic groups and 364 dialects spread across the country, with 6.6 million people over 5 years of age who speak an Indigenous language (INALI, 2008). To tackle this challenge, the minister of education, Dr. Reyes Tamez, assigned educational researcher Sylvia Schmelkes the task of setting up and developing the program of the GCIBE.

BIOGRAPHICAL TRAJECTORY AND CAREER OF
SYLVIA SCHMELKES

Sylvia Schmelkes is without doubt one of the most emblematic and renowned researchers in Mexico and Latin America. Her career spans 4 decades and is dedicated to the study and development of educational models covering diverse topics, among which stand out adult education, the quality of basic education, values education, and intercultural education.

Sylvia Schmelkes's biographical trajectory has interculturality written all over it. Her Czech father and Argentine-born mother migrated to Mexico as a consequence of World War II, after residing in the Philippines. Schmelkes was born in Mexico City in 1948, where she received her primary and secondary education in a bilingual school. "I have become a cultural hybrid," she said during our interview. For her, a bilingual past informs her belief that to understand intercultural aspects means to be able to compare different kinds of logic, different ways of thinking, based on respect and appreciation for the respective other. "Rebellion against injustice moves me in life," declares Schmelkes (1998, p. 219), and while expressing a sense of powerlessness, her work is infused by an optimistic and hopeful vision of what education can do to improve the living conditions of the most underprivileged social groups.

Her trajectory can be described in terms of three main stages. During the first years of her professional life, her work focused mainly as a researcher in the fields of rural and adult education (Muñoz, 1998). Schmelkes recognizes the CEE as her real professional school, where she learned with exceptional teachers like Pablo Latapí and Carlos Muñoz (Schmelkes, 1998). She worked at CEE for almost 25 years (1970–1994), 10 of which she was the center's academic director. It should be noted that the CEE, founded by Pablo Latapí (1927–2009), one of the most eminent Mexican researchers, was the first institute in Mexico dedicated to educational research. Schmelkes acknowledges that Latapí exercised a major influence on her professional career: He instilled in her a fundamental orientation towards justice in education. She recognizes this influence in her dedication to adult education, educational quality, intercultural education, values education, and to the analysis of educational policy (Schmelkes, 2009a). Among the researchers who most strongly influenced her training, the name of Eugenio Maurer stands out, a researcher with the CEE and a highly knowledgeable expert and advocate for the rights of the Indigenous cultures of Chiapas. She could not have performed the role of intercultural coordinator without her research background or without her knowledge of the research carried out by others about Indigenous communities, making this experience crucial for her professional life.

During Schmelkes's last years as Director of the CEE she acted as head of international comparative studies on various topics, like quality and

equity in basic education. In this second stage of her career, she provided advice on public policies, intervention projects, and the evaluation of innovative experiences. In 1994 she left the CEE to collaborate as a teacher-researcher with the Educational Research Department at the National Polytechnic Institute, a prestigious institute in the field of qualitative research in education. Her academic work was enhanced by her experience as a consultant and an adviser for national organizations such as the Mexican Ministry of Education as well as for international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The third and final stage of maturity in her career is defined by her work related to values education and *IE*. In 2000 she was invited to participate in the design of the policy on bilingual IE, and a year later, she was appointed GCIBE at the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, a position she held until 2007. This experience marks a milestone in her career because she faced the enormous challenge of establishing bridges between academics, the demands of Indigenous communities, and civil society with the state. Her goal was no less than to translate these demands into proposals of educational policy and actions of educational development for the entire population.

Currently Schmelkes is the director of the Research Institute for Educational Development at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Several papers reviewing Sylvia Schmelkes's contributions to education in Mexico have been previously published (e.g., Latapí, 2008; Muñoz, 1998; Paniagua, 2008; Salazar, 2008). Her written work exceeds 100 articles and essays, including almost 100 chapters in books, more than 20 single-authored and co-authored books, numerous documents, texts included in memoirs, reviews and comments, as well as conference transcripts. Her works have been published in Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, and German by institutes such as Organization of American States (OEA), UNESCO, the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, Stanford University, and by prestigious publishers around the world.

Her research and policy work covers three major areas of intellectual production. First, her work on diagnostic research related to specific aspects of IE includes works dedicated to the analysis of the problems of IE in elementary, upper secondary, and higher education levels. It includes historical analyses that identify the most significant problems, as well as the trends and challenges in various areas. It examines innovative experiences in different educational levels and regions of the country to derive lessons learned and outline possible horizons for innovation. The second area of importance involves her analysis and review of the IE scholarship, its significance, implications, dimensions, scopes, and proposals.

Schmelkes presents a wide variety of theoretical reflections associated with interculturality, whether related to concepts and problems of this field

of study or linked to democracy, values education, adult education, or equity. The development of proposals for specific policies and programs in the field of IE is the third area of important contributions made by Schmelkes. This third group of works includes guidelines and curricular proposals aimed at elementary school teachers. She examines the scope and limitations of public policies aimed at specific population groups such as migrants, urban and rural Indigenous peoples, and addresses issues of Indigenous languages and the national education curriculum, among others.

Pablo Latapí, when commenting on Schmelkes career when she received the Tlamatini Award[3] in 2003, summed up the fundamental contribution of her work:

As a researcher, Teacher Schmelkes has understood how to assume the role of bridging theoretical and practical knowledge, academics and politicians, creators and users of knowledge; as a result of the moral and scientific authority she enjoys, quite a few innovations and reforms implemented in various states of the country have become reality due her appropriate advice and orientation. (Quoted in Salazar, 2008, p. 15)

THE CHALLENGES OF INTERCULTURAL AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION: SCHMELKES'S WORK AT THE GCIBE

In this section we look at the central aspects of Schmelkes's work taking a critical perspective on IE and focusing on her work with the GCIBE. We discuss her contributions to the development of a diagnostic vision as well as the major challenges she identifies with regard to IE in Mexico. We then address the nature and scope of her contributions to the design of policies, programs, and projects of curriculum development for public education in Mexico. The central thesis that we set out to develop throughout this article is that the fundamental contribution of Schmelkes' work in the field of IE is to establish a bridge between the research findings, the demands of the Indigenous groups, and the state, with a view to the proposal of educational policies, programs, and projects for the entire Mexican population.

As noted earlier in this article, in the 1970s, several Latin American countries undertook reforms to their educational systems. This occurred in Mexico, where bilingual-bicultural education was formally established in 1978 and operated through the newly created General Directorate for Indigenous Education within the Ministry of Education. This department tended to enforce the Spanish language through its policies and programs. While instruction during the first 2 years of elementary school is handled in the Indigenous language, in the third grade Spanish is gradually introduced, and by the sixth grade of elementary school, instruction is predominantly in Spanish.

In an article prior to her incorporation into the government as coordinator of GCIBE, Sylvia Schmelkes (2000) presented an overview of several problems suffered within bilingual-bicultural education, which until then was offered by the state to the Indigenous population. These problems included incomplete curriculum coverage; higher rates of grade repetition; lower rates of retention and completion; teachers with little preparation; and lack of support from Indigenous parents for schooling in their mother tongue, expecting instead that children would learn Spanish. The problems point to issues with coverage and performance, quality of education, curriculum design, and with the views and priorities of Indigenous peoples regarding language and culture.

Based on Schmelkes's analysis the GCIBE would propose its work program, which would be based on a critical review of what Indigenous education had been like until then. First, the revised program would challenge the historical project of assimilating Indigenous peoples into Mexico's national culture. Although the creation of the General Directorate for Indigenous Education in 1978 aimed to change this approach, all teachers, even Indigenous ones, had been trained to believe that neither the language nor the culture of Indigenous peoples were of value and that the best option was to adopt Mestizo culture. Teachers spread and reproduced this idea among the students. This attitude thrived in a context with a lack of resources, appropriate training, as well as little and ineffective supervision, which prevails in the schools serving Indigenous people. This created a subculture of low expectations and tolerance for incompetence and corruption. In this context, Indigenous education began to deteriorate, marginalized from the decision-making process in the educational system. When transferred to state administrations,[4] the situation worsened because it exacerbated the effects of racism, because the Mestizo population living near Indigenous areas tended to embrace racist ideas (S. Schmelkes, personal communication, March 2011).

The GCIBE also sought to meet the Indigenous demands laid down in the San Andrés agreements, which Schmelkes considered "the most coherent Indigenous proposal for an education that takes the Indigenous population into account" (Schmelkes, 2000, p. 332, original text in English). Regarding education specifically, the San Andrés agreements established that Indigenous education should be bilingual and intercultural, respectful of the knowledge, traditions, and forms of Indigenous organization, as well as of the educational work of Indigenous peoples within their cultural space. Its content should include "the history, customs, traditions and all those values that are components of our cultural roots and national identity" (Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, 2003, p. 88). In addition, the agreements included a number of specific demands that will be mentioned later in this text.

The creation of the GCIBE by the government of Vicente Fox seems to have responded to a dual purpose: on the one hand, to express willingness

to address Indigenous claims launched by the Zapatista uprising, and on the other hand, to show on the international stage that the government of political alternation was characterized by a higher sensitivity to social issues. However, this apparent commitment carried limited political will, producing many obstacles that the newly created department faced in carrying out its purposes.

The Challenges of Establishing the GCIBE

The first difficulty that the GCIBE faced was that its scope of intervention did not include pre-school and elementary education, which continued under the responsibility of the General Directorate for Indigenous Education. This meant that the GCIBE had to focus on secondary schools, high schools, universities, and teacher training facilities that incorporate Indigenous aspects. A second challenge was the lack of involvement of Indigenous people in the leadership of the GCIBE. As a non-Indigenous person, Schmelkes assumed the position considering it an opportunity to work educationally with the national population in the struggle against racism and discrimination (Schmelkes, 2008). Schmelkes assumed that an Indigenous person would later replace her: "I have always maintained that Indigenous peoples need to make the decisions in matters that affect them if we want to modify their current situation," Schmelkes explained in the interview for this article. (It is noteworthy that the person who replaced Schmelkes in the GCIBE's coordination in 2007 was not Indigenous either.)

Another serious obstacle that the GCIBE had to face was the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), which constitutes a political force in Mexico, with its membership of more than 1 million teachers. The leaders of the union often make their influence available to the various governments in exchange for personal benefits and favors for their closest supporters. The politicization of the Mexican teaching force has been the subject of various studies and is considered one of the most serious problems faced by the country. According to Arnaut (1998), for instance, the union has "expropriated, canceled, and contravened the professional rights of teachers" (p. 215). Due to the contradictory or ambiguous role it has played, the SNTE has become a "formidable, almost structural obstacle in the design and the execution of diverse reform projects that aim to transform some aspects of the educational system" (Arnaut, 2003, p. 404). At the same time, it has produced a phenomenon of "invisibility" of the student and of students' education as the core and meaning of the professional action of teachers (Fierro, 2007). This is why we share the point of view of other ethnographic works that affirm that educational change in Mexico requires the deep transformation of political practices in education, both by the administration and the union organization, so that the

professional capabilities of educators may be developed (Fierro, Tapia, & Rojo, 2009).

These political circumstances have also generated a subculture among Indigenous teachers in which once they reach a position at a public school, they succumb to professional inertia and expect additional payment for any additional effort. Furthermore, regulations stipulate that Indigenous teachers must be bilingual, in Spanish and their native language. Yet, the union assigns positions regardless of the Indigenous language the teacher speaks, and in 30% of the cases, this is not the language of the community where the teacher is sent to teach. As Schmelkes explained during our interview, this provides more room for maneuver to the union, but generates all kinds of political arrangements, with any interest for education left standing on the sidelines. Facing these obstacles, and with a team consisting of 12 people at the head office and around 200 freelance staff, the GCIBE started its activities.

Led by Schmelkes, the GCIBE tried to make every possible effort to respond to the claims laid down in the San Andrés agreements, and one of the main lines of action was IE. For Schmelkes (2004a), "Interculturality, from its conception, denies the existence of asymmetries due to power relations. It assumes that diversity is an asset" (p. 27). This is where it differs from the assimilationist policies of integrationism, segregation, or oblivion, which seek to eliminate the differences. Schmelkes continues, "interculturality recognizes the difference not only as something necessary, but as something virtuous. This interculturality, which implies a relationship, also includes understanding and respect between cultures. As point of arrival, as creative utopia, it does not allow for asymmetries" (p. 27) The nuance of putting an end to power-based asymmetries as a goal, seeks to highlight its importance as an objective—the creative utopia, and gives interculturality a clear political perspective. The extent to which education might contribute to put an end to those asymmetries still remains to be addressed, especially when dealing with the education offered by the government.

In some works, Schmelkes (e.g., 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2004d) discusses the problem of educational tasks in the transition of the multicultural society towards interculturality as a condition for its democratic progress. She recognizes the existence of huge asymmetries, the most obvious and painful being the socio-economic asymmetry, the political asymmetry (relating to the possibility of making Indigenous peoples' voice heard, the social asymmetry (which according to the United Nations Development Program, defines poverty as a lack of options), and the educational asymmetry. From her perspective, education must address "school asymmetry," which concerns the structural causes as well as causes that can be attributed to the day-to-day running of the school and the classroom, and what she calls "values asymmetry," which she describes as

the appreciation by minority cultures of what is theirs, the cultural self-esteem, the need to believe in what they are and to acknowledge themselves as creators of culture from the sphere of who they are. . . . Values asymmetry is a manifestation of the internalization of racism and it constitutes a strong impediment to interculturality. (Schmelkes, 2004a, p. 28)

This internalization might be analyzed in the way Bourdieu theorizes the introjection of objective social structures into the subjective, mental experience of agents. Thus, Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *habitus* points precisely to practices that reflect the way in which social structures shape the structures of subjectivity. In the context of relations of domination/submission, like the ones addressed from a critical perspective, it is not possible to modify the *habitus* without setting up social practices, particularly in places like schools in which there is the possibility of experiencing relationships based on respect and reciprocity; practices where the individual agent might develop new dispositions in response to the objective conditions s/he would be encountering. Gasché (2008) explains:

Domination/submission endows the intercultural relationship, on the one hand, with economic, social, political and legal conditions, and on the other hand with provisions, attitudes and asymmetric values, unequal but complementary, which in their complementarity are reiterated and reinforced every day through routine and schematic behaviors between dominated subjects and submissive subjects. (Quoted in Sartorello, 2009, p. 83)

It is no coincidence that as Indigenous movements have strengthened their presence and political force, they have acquired greater influence on education and developed independent intercultural educational projects. However, as noted by Baronnet (2009),

there are structural limitations as long as Mexico does not relax the national policy framework to allow for the regionalization of educational programs, an action that has been taken in other Latin American countries in which both the state and organizations of Indigenous authority interact as key players in the interculturalization of the content and methods of school-based learning. (p. 393)

Despite the limitations in the framework, Schmelkes has developed a strong program of policies and projects for promoting IE based on her research. In the next section, we turn to a discussion of these policies and programs.

Policies and Programs of the GCIBE

In response to the above, we can appreciate that the work of coordinating the GCIBE is not only set in a complex socio-political time but also in a contradictory institutional framing and with a very narrow scope. However, Schmelkes led the development of a highly ambitious work program with

the goal of fomenting the recovery and appreciation of Indigenous culture to interact and put forward Indigenous projects, based on pride, not on subordination and to establish IE and the reduction of racism. The work was transversally organized, so that all areas belonging to the GCIBE would be dedicated to both aspects. Here we discuss some of the strategies and programs developed by the GCIBE, highlighting how each strategy involved different constituents.

First, a key issue was the upgrade of teacher training. Indigenous teachers needed to deal with bilingual and intercultural teaching methods, while non-Indigenous teachers needed to address the topic of IE for all. The strategy was focused on getting teachers to identify and address diversity. These two goals were the focus of the work all over the country, including Mexico City, where most of the Indigenous population is concentrated. Training was given to approximately 60,000 teachers by means of face-to-face sessions using materials specifically prepared for this purpose. Another issue addressed by the GCIBE was that of seasonal migrant workers, specifically young people, many of them Indigenous, who travel through different regions of the country pursuing harvest labor on commercial plantations. Again, the work focused on providing teachers who worked with these populations with the material and competencies in order to address and to teach the students to appreciate diversity.

One of the most important lines of intervention consisted in taking advantage of the secondary education reform, which provided students from seventh to ninth grades with 3 hours per week during the 3 years of secondary school to focus on learning their language and culture. The program was designed by Indigenous teachers who had mastery of their particular language and knew their culture well. Furthermore, in all schools located in places where at least 30% of the population speaks an Indigenous language, a subject dealing with Indigenous culture and taught in the local language was introduced as a mandatory subject for all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

As Schmelkes explained in the interview for this article, this subject was based on two pedagogical principles. The first was to avoid segregation and to pedagogically mobilize the diversity already present in the school, and the second, that the language is learned through the study of the culture that it expresses. With regard to her approach to curriculum design, Schmelkes felt that only the local Indigenous teachers could decide what aspects of the Indigenous culture to incorporate in a national curriculum. To that end, the GCIBE organized forums, in which people of 51 different ethnic groups participated. The forums lasted 2 days and included dynamics aimed at having them answer a generative question: "What aspect of your culture would you like all Mexicans to know about?" Afterwards, Schmelkes describes, participants proposed topics such as Mother Earth, religious festivities, ethnobotany, among others, and on the second day an

impressive richness emerged. Stories were told and later worksheets were made, which served as a basis to formulate proposals of incorporation into the curriculum.

Among the 68 different cultural groups existing in Mexico, Schmelkes explained, it was possible to work with 8 of them and to make progress with another 8. Every group identified nodal points of their culture, which were transformed into a phrase that condensed the most important aspects of each culture. The program is structured around these phrases, integrating the study of multiple cultural expressions (music, dance, painting, art, literature). This approach generated content that was too extensive and did not fit into the stipulated 3 hours per week during 3 years. Yet it nonetheless served as a guide for the teacher. Schmelkes explains that the students are instructed to investigate each of these elements in their communities, using their own language. Students then present the results of their investigations both orally and in writing, using the Indigenous language. This results in metalinguistic activities and in knowledge of the phonetics, morphology, and syntax of the language involved. Those who do not speak the language learn with those who do and participate to the extent of their possibilities.

As we can see, the work conducted by Schmelkes takes advantage of the spaces offered by the system itself to enhance the importance and relevance of the curriculum for Indigenous communities and for the overall project of interculturality. Operating within a gradualist approach that generates modest yet effective curricular changes, Schmelkes's experience provides examples for addressing the needs that are felt and recognized by the Indigenous communities within the constraints of new spaces in the official educational system.

At the high school level (grades 10 to 12), the GCIBE established a new intercultural modality for students living in predominantly Indigenous communities, and serving primarily Indigenous (but also fewer non-Indigenous) students. These initiatives were aimed at providing infrastructure and support with regard to teaching materials where there were none. When Schmelkes left the GCIBE, there were 24 of those high school programs.[5] She explained that the intention of this program modality was not to depart too far from the general high school curriculum because university admission exams are based on that program. If a different curriculum were established, they would condemn the graduates to fail that exam. Therefore, the GCIBE adopted an eclectic solution, which incorporated language and culture, because a high school program that did not capture those elements seemed pointless from an IE perspective. Furthermore, technology was incorporated as a transversal element of the program for building community ties through production projects in which the community taught the students and vice versa.

In reconsidering the way that Natural and Social Sciences were to be taught, Schmelkes describes taking account of the holistic views of

Indigenous people in contrast to the Western scientific view, which fragments reality into disciplines. Furthermore, Schmelkes describes structuring the Social Sciences to encompass both the local to global, starting with the town's geography and history, and then moving into the wider contexts of the official curriculum. The same principle was applied to Civics, where the issues of justice, law, and rights, for example, were discussed with direct reference to the students' real-life experiences.

To address the needs of Indigenous students, the GCIBE strategy focused on teacher education and "normal" schools. Currently in Mexico there are 16 teacher-training institutions that work with an intercultural curriculum and admit Indigenous students. These students attend six additional hours to learn about their language, their culture, and the way to teach them. They also learn to teach a second language, either Spanish or another Indigenous language. The GCIBE decided to install an undergraduate course in Bilingual Intercultural Primary Education because Indigenous teachers have never received professional initial training. Schmelkes explains that Indigenous teachers are hired with nothing but a high school degree, without having any exposure to conceptions of pedagogy or ways of thinking about culture. "It is the first time in the history of this country that Indigenous teachers will have the opportunity to receive initial teacher training and also the first time that they will learn how to write their own language" (Schmelkes, 2009b, p. 362).

Schmelkes explained that these pedagogical innovations were done based on the same principle of non-segregation as other initiatives. She noted that it is much more complicated to be a bilingual teacher because it requires additional hours, yet 85% of the curriculum has to be the same. The content of all subjects included in this curriculum were given an intercultural dimension. For example, in teaching child development, Schmelkes noted, the syllabus included theories of how Indigenous children learn, promoting the development of opportunities for children to observe and to imitate. The cultural perspective was gradually introduced into the different subjects. For Schmelkes, having Indigenous and non-Indigenous people study together is in itself an intercultural experience. This informs the approach of the GCIBE to education beyond high school.

At the level of higher education, Schmelkes (2009b) reported that the creation of eight intercultural universities was promoted, and the Indigenous Autonomous University of Mexico, founded in 1982, adopted an intercultural modality. While based on a flexible approach that is adaptable to different contexts, these universities, share a philosophy and certain general principles, such as not focusing on Indigenous students exclusively. During our interview, Schmelkes enumerated the goals of these programs: to engage Indigenous cultures into a dialogue with the rest of the world, as equal partners; to be bilingual or multilingual; to spread the Indigenous languages and cultures; to value, respect, and learn to live with diversity; to train professionals committed to the development of their own towns and

regions; to select students using non-academic criteria, including, if necessary, using gender quotas and quotas of ethnic groups and regions; to base their pedagogical model on teaching, research, and building community ties; and to have representatives of the Indigenous communities in their governing bodies.

While intercultural universities are not only for Indigenous persons, these institutions are located in Indigenous areas and are primarily destined to the Indigenous population. The original design of the intercultural universities is based on the fact that the research on language, culture, history, and regional problems is located at the heart of the universities' tasks. The academic programs are tailored to the needs and potentials of the region. The first programs were established with a focus on Intercultural Communication, Sustainable Development, Language and Culture, and in some places Cultural Tourism or Alternative Tourism.

In our interview, Schmelkes explained that the pedagogy used in intercultural universities is sustained on three pillars, which in this context would gain new significance because of the commitment to communities and to interculturality. but which only work in very few Mexican universities and even fewer of those serving Indigenous people. The first one is *research*, because students do research from day one, as do the teachers. The second one is *building community ties*, providing community service, which is another way to learn. It starts with research and leads to *projects* that involve cultural and linguistic research, which the university develops with the community to respond to their needs. Projects are approved by the community and because the students usually work in the same communities, they are more likely to continue. The third pillar is *teaching*. The three pillars are focused on the universities to train both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teams to support the development of the regions where the programs are located. Usually research projects are limited to advanced students, community service is done during a reduced amount of hours, and the approach to teaching is based in a students' own creative work, which is usually far from ordinary.

The Indigenous universities were perhaps the most profound and consistent action undertaken by the GCIBE in response to the San Andrés agreements, which established the need to create "centers of higher education to promote the study and dissemination of indigenous cultural wealth as well as the concerns and needs of its cultures" as well as the "promotion of the study and the teaching of indigenous languages in the universities" (Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, 2003, p. 104). Because these are newly created institutions, they do not face the overwhelming inertia that affects the levels of basic and upper secondary education. Thus, they also have the potential to create the greatest possible synergy with international networks and movements oriented under similar perspectives with a view to strengthening and disseminating the results of their efforts.

Intercultural Education for Non-Indigenous People

With regard to the idea of IE for non-Indigenous people, the second main line of action defined by the GCIBE, we want to emphasize the following aspects as the most important ones. In many ways, this area of work is also the most complex because it seeks to address challenges that stem from the deepest problems since the Spanish colonization and the constitution of the Mexican nation: racism and discrimination.

In our interview, Schmelkes elaborates on key ideas that inform several of her works, regarding the pedagogical and curricular hypothesis that under-pin the work aimed at the entire population. For Schmelkes, this work is about taking one of three steps and two epistemological leaps, but in a spiral form. The first step is *knowledge* because you cannot respect something you do not know. It is necessary to give an opportunity to knowledge that arouses the ability to feel awe, to recognize that there are things that you did not know and that make students thrive. Then there is the leap from knowledge to *respect*. It is not an automatic process, so you have to work on the issue by means of values education; there is no other way. Then there is the leap from respect to *appreciation*, and moving from acceptance to friendship. All this does not take place sequentially, but in phases of spiral movement.

Regarding the population at large, the television series *Mexican Peoples* and *Window to My Community*[6] were produced by GCIBE; the latter was also made into a radio program, and four of the video programs were distributed to all elementary schools in the country. For Schmelkes (2009b), this program is one of the most important because it is a program in which children from an Indigenous community tell other children about their own lives and what makes their communities interesting. One of the aspects of these programs that stands out is that it is the children themselves who write their own script and decide what they want to say. For Schmelkes, this approach fosters respect among non-Indigenous viewers. In the inter-view, she put it this way:

The children who appear on these programs do so with a lot of poise and enthu-siasm. You can't but appreciate this child who is teaching you things. And—this being another hypothesis—you transfer this appreciation for everybody else like him, who is different like him and different in general terms.

Schmelkes relied on the potential of a focus on values for the education of the population as the adequate way to deal with the issue of racism, which requires a deep development of autonomous moral judgment. She lays her bet for the use of moral dilemmas on Kohlberg's (1992) landmark work, as the model to promote moral judgment development and to inquire into attitudes and beliefs regarding cultural differences (see Schmelkes, 2004a).[7] Kohlberg's psychological model of moral development has been subject to ample critique (e.g., Gilligan, 1977; Noddings, 1984; Nucci, 2001), especially from a socio-cultural perspective (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, &

Cain, 1998; Tappan, 1997, 1998; Wertsch, 1997). More recently, poststruc-
turalist theory has raised questions about the universalizing way human
subjectivity is conceived within developmental theories such as Kohlberg's,
presenting challenges for dealing with problems like racism in moral edu-
cation (see Applebaum, 2005; Boyd, 2004; May, 1992; Young, 1990).

According to Boyd (2004), "human subjectivity is a form of self-
awareness and sense of agency that is constituted by the interaction of
embodied persons and their interpretations of that interaction" (p. 5). This
view of subjectivity implies that harmful relations are not simply a matter of
individual interactions, but rather, are shaped by larger forces of oppres-
sion that share group relations. For Boyd, "forms of oppression such as
racism are not unrelated, episodic behavioral patterns of discrete individu-
als considered as autonomous agents. Instead, they need to be seen as
'collective practices or projects' that historically produce, and are repro-
duced by a particular form of subjectivity" (p. 14).

This understanding of subjectivity as a relational and political process is
precisely the focus of the more critical approach to interculturality men-
tioned at the beginning of this essay, which is not simply focused on
teaching, but takes on the larger social and cultural context. Attending to
the power dynamics that shape subjectivity expands the pedagogical view
and demands both attending to and seeking to transform the social and
historical contexts from which inequality and discrimination emerge. This
includes giving increasing attention to the decision-making process and
who participates within it. As Iris Marion Young (1990) notes, "Where social
group differences exist and some groups are privileged while others are
oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to
those group differences in order to undermine oppression" (p. 3, quoted
from original English version).

With this view of subjectivity in mind, the limitations of Schmelkes's
approach to the work of the GCIBE and its focus on interculturality,
particularly when it comes to confronting racism, become evident. The very
institutional structures from which the work is developed are wrought with
the contradictions that the work seeks to confront; racism is institutional-
ized in "the structures, in legislation, in bureaucracy, in the day-to-day
practices of the institutions: that unconscious, but none the less evil,
racism, which resists intercultural proposals" (Schmelkes, 2009b, p. 369).
In the context of IE, this fact does not mean that we abandon those tools
that might encourage the development of a moral conscience in individual
subjects as such. Rather, it means that we must acknowledge that these tools
only gain relevance in a context of great autonomy, as in the case of
Indigenous universities. Such projects allow for experiencing the kind
of quotidian exchange between Indigenous people and Mestizos that is
premised on equity. This in turn can invoke and profound and constant
sensitivity toward the social, in order to generate new practices. And yet,
even with this in mind, it is no less overwhelming to realize the limited

reach of educational interventions such as Schmelkes's with the GCIBE, when they are not integrated with similar other efforts in the legislative, political, and economic spheres. Because, in the end, the key question persists: in whose interest and to whose benefit, in the end, is the nation's investment in the cause of Indigenous communities?

REASSESSING AND LOOKING AHEAD

In our outline of Schmelkes's trajectory we have suggested that one of her most important contributions has been building bridges between the research findings, the Indigenous demands contained in the San Andrés agreements, and the Mexican state. From the analysis exercise, which is in no way exhaustive, we draw the following three conclusions. First, the work program established by Schmelkes for the GCIBE is clearly oriented by a critique of the educational system, in particular of the education imparted to Indigenous communities. In addition, her work is clearly oriented by her intention of responding to the San Andrés agreements. These commitments and the pedagogical processes that Schmelkes promoted could not be explained without understanding her intellectual and educational background as a researcher. Schmelkes was educated in the decades when Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of liberation" was a fundamental inspiration. In this sense, Schmelkes the public officer never ceases to be a researcher. Precisely because of this condition, the proposals and programs she developed as coordinator of the GCIBE always had an explicit academic foundation; one may share her perspectives or not, and one can challenge the soundness of her theoretical assumptions, but there is always the possibility for dialogue, to enrich the ideas, which is in any case rather unusual in an educational ministry in Mexico. Although Schmelkes tried and managed to become a link between research, Indigenous peoples, and the state, the scope of her efforts and, more importantly, the continuance of the projects she promoted are still uncertain.

Second, it is crucial to observe that the reconsideration of an IE from the perspective of Indigenous peoples requires a deep, sustained, representative involvement, genuinely mirroring the voices of the community. It is a process that is difficult to setup and implement. There will be no progress without an increasing seizure of control by the Indigenous peoples themselves, of their educational processes, where the state is to provide the necessary resources and recognize the value of Indigenous education, but giving much more space to the reformulation of processes and content by Indigenous peoples. For this, it is crucial to challenge the institutionalized domination and oppression through a conception of justice that offers a view of a heterogeneous public that recognizes and affirms groups differences (Young, 2000).

This context of intercultural education within which Schmelkes carries out her projects is, in our view, one of the most complex and contradictory

spaces of the educational system. Interculturality presents a challenge to the liberal tradition of the Mexican state since its origins as well as to the neo-liberal approaches chosen since the end of the last century. Both of these promote the homogenization and the denial of cultural differences in the population. In this sense, the process of recognition, appreciation, and respect proposed by Schmelkes, which must be geared to engage Mestizos in the struggle for the recognition of Indigenous rights and the improvement of their living conditions, is extremely relevant and pertinent. For Mexico, a first and urgent matter is to stop the continued aggressions that, more or less covertly, are carried out against the experiences of Indigenous movements in the country.

Our third and final observation regards Schmelkes's decision to establish ties between the state, the Indigenous peoples, and research, which we see as a high-risk gamble. It required Schmelkes to take the floor based on her academic authority and accept to be part of a system, which although adopting a "politically correct" discourse, has not committed to the underlying meaning involved in the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples. The mediatory function Schmelkes tried to fulfill entailed that she distance herself from extreme positions on either side. Supported by her own moral authority in order to work within institution that does not have one, Schmelkes had to take advantage of all available spaces as best she could, even when this was not the best alternative. This means that she had to permanently row against the tide. The number and diversity of innovations and achievements of the GCIBE cannot be explained without recognizing a significant group of committed people who had to overcome the limitations in abilities, human resources, and materials, among others.

Analyzing Sylvia Schmelkes's trajectory and contributions, the magnitude and complexity of the tasks involved becomes evident, revealing that an IE for Mexico is necessarily a long-term project. As Schmelkes herself explained during our interview:

This was a beginning. It was about somehow laying the path, which was important, so that it could be continued, further developed and strengthened. The progress proved to be very unequal in each educational level and in the scenarios of educational action. The achievements are barely the starting point of arduous and necessarily long-term efforts for establishing quality education for the Indigenous population and intercultural education for everybody in Mexico.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes have been translated from Spanish.

2. The Spanish word *mestizo* refers to the majority population who are descendants from two or more racial/ethic groups, particularly those of European and Indigenous descent.

3. The *Tlamatini*, "those who know things" in náhuatl language, were equivalent to the philosophers in the time of the Mexicas. In April 1996 the board of the Universidad Iberoamericana established the Tlamatini Award to recognize those who have made very relevant contributions to education in Mexico.

4. The federal government centrally controlled the vast majority of the schools of basic and secondary education in the country. In 1992, this control, or at least its operational aspects and a good part of the administrative burden, was transferred to the states.

5. 18 intercultural baccalaureates (BICs) in Oaxaca, 4 BICs in Chiapas, and 2 BICs in Tabasco.

6. Source: http://ventana.ilce.edu.mx. There are already 32 videos available, which contain more than 200 capsules or short stories about the following Indigenous groups of Mexico: Lacandon, Otomi, Mazahua, Chol, Mayo, Tepehuano, Purépechas, Chontales, Mixes, Chocholtecs, ValleyZapotecs, Chinantecs, Ixcatecs, BustamanteTlaxcaltecs, Triquis, Tarahumaras, Tzeltal, Hueyapan Nahuas, Zoques, Tojolabales, Totonacs, Tzotzil, Guerrero Nahuas, Mazatecs, Cucapah, Paipai, Kumiai, Kiliwas, migrant childfarmworkers, Matlazincs, Amuzgos, and Puebla Nahuas. Ten additional programs are being developed.

7. Lawrence Kohlberg (1992) is among the better known scholars of cognitive developmental theory. Taking Piaget's studies and Dewey's and Rawls's philosophical premises as reference, Kohlberg proposed that human beings go through the same developmental stages in moral judgment about the concept of justice, with independence from the cultural context in which they evolve. Kohlberg proposes three developmental stages: the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the post-conventional. The post-conventional stage implies an autonomous morality, where the subject is capable of assuming a critical stand in regard to social norms from an angle of universal ethic principles.

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