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Book Review

Seeds of Freedom: Liberating Education in Guatemala

by Clark Taylor. (2014). Paradigm: Boulder, CO. 229 pp.
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With a central theme of emancipatory education, *Seeds of Freedom: Liberating Education in Guatemala* by Clark Taylor (2014) delivers a powerful historical narrative that reaffirms the value of an education for liberation. The remarkable story of Santa Maria Tzejá, a remote village in northern Guatemala, demonstrates how social activism and a liberating education contributed to the socio-economic development and empowerment of this indigenous community. Through extensive interviews with students, families, community leaders, and teachers, Taylor describes a story that has been unfolding for over twenty-five years.

Taylor, a scholar-activist from the University of Massachusetts at Boston and a Protestant pastor, provides a snapshot description of Santa Maria's humble foundation and the near subhuman conditions in which it was established. Determined Mayan workers were being exploited in the plantations *finca* system; yet, with assistance from church representatives, these men and women took on the extreme hardship of forming a cooperative settlement in the Guatemalan jungle. Despite the surrounding violence of civil unrest and guerilla warfare, the founders envisioned a community dedicated to the well-being of all members and steeped in an education for freedom.

After initiating contact with community members through his church in Massachusetts, Taylor became recognized as an ally to the village, thus able to build trust with residents. Likewise, the author was familiar with the political and social context within the village. Taylor's accounts begin in 1998, when an initial cohort of twelve students from the village gained access to university studies. Intrigued by the village's self-sustained practices and deep beliefs in education as the practice of freedom, Taylor tracks the students' academic development and community involvement, as well as their eventual emergence as local and national leaders and social justice activists.

Through local partnerships, church organizational networks, and affiliations with international allies, Santa Maria's settlers sought to build social platforms for community development, including college scholarships for twelve students. Felipa, Juvencio, and Edwin were among the twelve students (eight men and four women) who launched their journey to higher education against all odds. Taylor highlights the stories of how these three remarkable students and their families were forced to flee Guatemala due to the outbreak of civil war. Seeking refuge in Mexico, they were schooled in makeshift classrooms run by non-licensed teachers. The students credit their academic success to the encouragement of Santa Maria's members who were not only concerned about students' mastery of the subject matter, but were also firm in their conviction that the youth become political advocates for Santa Maria's people.

In spite of Guatemala's history of oppression toward the Mayan people as well as the pervasive views of indigenous groups as unschooled and unskilled workers, the village of Santa Maria instilled in their youth a thirst for education. Taylor connects Santa Maria's emancipatory pedagogies with those of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Making a distinction between schooling that resembles "depository-like-knowledge" versus

education for freedom, a Freirean vision of education—whether intentionally or unintentionally—guided villagers’ quest for an education that prepared youth to advocate for their full-range of human and civic rights.

In *Seeds of Freedom*, readers cannot help but be impressed by the young teachers’ and parents’ persistence in realizing their goals both in Guatemala and later as refugees in Mexico. As the young teachers reorganized to train other teacher-volunteers in refugee camps, they emphasized the political dimension of social reality in order to help learners better understand the oppressive structures they encountered daily. These ongoing efforts proved to be successful twelve years later when the refugees returned to Santa Maria; however, they soon faced a new challenge. The villagers who stayed behind in Santa Maria had been taught by credentialed teachers who adhered to state educational mandates, which included the prohibition of public discussion about the country’s social problems. While the child refugees in Mexico were guided to critically question their social-political conditions, the students who remained in Santa Maria had been taught to conform. Notwithstanding their contrasting educational experiences, a desire for rebuilding their community alongside shared views of education for liberation allowed the two separated populations to reconcile differences by situating education as the driving force to re-envision collective goals. In the subsequent years, reunified efforts allowed a more established Santa Maria to see youth complete degrees in secondary and post-secondary education. Their achievement is extraordinary, considering the small indigenous village consisted of only 1300 members, and by 2010, 250 residents were high school graduates, and 72 had continued on to university-level studies.

Taylor’s narrative invites the reader to question education in global contexts. What can other countries learn from the lessons of Santa Maria? How is it possible that a small rural village can cultivate social consciousness in education while most pedagogical models continue to be aligned with corporate interests? Why does an education that promotes oppressive values continue to be supported? Why is it so hard to foster an education that teaches children and youth to be critical of the world? How does non-inclusive education prepare students to not only become more engaged in the community, but also empowered to know their rights and analyze their place in society? Perhaps, as Taylor suggests, teaching that is grounded in critical perspectives will continue to be labeled as “subversive” as long as economic power structures dictate a nation’s educational agenda.

Even though Taylor does not expand upon the methodologies encompassing his research, his accounts are no less valuable. Moreover, his acknowledgement of his own privilege throughout his involvement in the project only makes his story more real. Taylor’s strong narrative skills and compassionate voice communicates a genuine understanding of the issues Santa Maria villagers faced. Through unflinching commitment, collective action, and deep understanding of pedagogical practices, Santa Maria’s vision for the future became a reality; not even the ordeals of war could compromise their ideals. Today, as a new generation of community members guides the path for Santa Maria’s future, *Seeds of Freedom* bears witness to the fact that an education for liberation is possible.

Author

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