

“We are peasants”: Exploring Place, Identity and the Political Role of Educators With the Zapatistas of Mexico and Norwegian Early Childhood Educators

Léa Marie Maison

University of Stavanger, Norway

Contact corresponding author: Léa Marie Maison, e-mail: maison.leamarie@uis.no

Abstract

This article explores the significance of peasant culture for sustainability education, the political engagement of the educator with sustainability and the understanding of herself as a political agent of change. Paolo Freire’s critical pedagogy and understanding of educators as political actors is used to explore the political and transformative role of the educator through both their profession and as members of local communities. This study is part of a doctoral project seeking to connect perspectives of Norwegian early childhood educators and members of the Mexican Zapatista social movement, who in both contexts identify as peasants. The critical use of a *bricolage* methodology allows us to expand on the critical lens chosen here and foster productive encounters between these disparate views (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Rogers, 2012). Results show that being a peasant fosters ecological, social, and political values which could help educators understand their role as members of local and global communities and develop education practices for sustainability that are transformative and empowering.

Keywords: *activism; ecology; educators’ role; peasant culture; place*

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Introduction

The environmental and climate crisis, as well as the numerous other disasters the world is witnessing, remind us that space and place are complex notions that directly affect our lives as members of both local and global communities. The ways actions at micro and macro levels are entangled are sometimes difficult to comprehend, as we navigate between context-specific and global concerns, that we share with distant individuals and communities with which we would seem to have little in common (UNESCO, 2021a).

The ecological crisis is an example of such concerns and affect all humans (and non-humans) collectively. The now popular concept of sustainability, interlacing environmental conservation with social, political and economic dimensions (UNESCO, 2021b), urges us to reflect on the way we humans situate ourselves in the world and in relationship to nature.

Such urgency has pushed education systems to include sustainability in their curriculum, also in early childhood education, as is the case of Norway (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). This article aims at contributing to this field of research and practice. It is part of a doctorate project that explores how viewing educators as political agents of change can benefit sustainability education, by making the perspectives of Norwegian early childhood educators and those of the Zapatista social movement of Mexico, meet.

The title of this article, “We are peasants”, is a direct quote from a Norwegian educator ironizing on the fact that most employees of this small kindergarten had a peasant background. This simple sentence opened the door to creating unexpected but productive encounters between the realities of this small Norwegian kindergarten and the Indigenous and peasant movement of the Zapatistas. This was made possible by the critical and decolonial use of a *bricolage* methodology allowing me to explore and look at multiple and disparate views together while using a variety of tools in the meaning-making process (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Rogers, 2012). Indeed, as “Confrontation with difference helps us to see anew, to move toward the light of epiphany” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 169), the *bricolage* allowed me to dive in the topic of peasant identity to explore how connecting with place may foster the political engagement of educators with sustainability issues. As sustainability is bound to the notion of environment – the environing and nature, *place*, as both a geographical, physical, and socially constructed entity, is what grounds sustainability into reality, the world (Seghezze, 2009; Somerville & Green, 2012).

Grounded in critical theory, the article takes as point of departure the political nature of education and discusses how being a peasant fosters a sense of belonging to place, and how this in turn can affect the political engagement of educators with sustainability and the understanding of themselves as political agents of change.

In this work, rather than the term *small-scale farmer*, the term *peasant* is chosen because of social connotations relevant to this work. As we will see, being a peasant means interacting with place at multiple levels: nature, the land and the elements, as well as the

local social environment and the global context. Before exploring and discussing the results of the study, a few words about the two contexts of interest for this work may be necessary.

The Zapatistas: An Indigenous and peasant movement

The Zapatista Indigenous social movement has, since the early 1990s, organized the autonomy of hundreds of Indigenous communities across Chiapas, in southeast Mexico. This anticapitalistic movement rose to resist the neoliberal politics of the State, deemed threatening to the Mexican communal organization of land and marginalizing vulnerable rural populations. A key element of this resistance movement was to redistribute land from rich non-Indigenous owners to poor peasants (Baronnet et al., 2011; Van Der Haar, 2005a).

The Zapatistas are one of the many Indigenous movements in Mexico that have a peasant dimension. In fact, in the Mexican context ethnicity and class domination, and the fight for rights and social justice associated with these, go hand in hand (Solano, 2005). Indeed, with the Spanish conquest, Indigenous peoples, dispossessed from their land, were made to work for the invader on so-called *fincas*. This system of domination went on for centuries, converting the Indigenous people into landless peasants (Solano, 2005).

This ethnic and peasant identity is reclaimed as a source of pride, as the Zapatistas reinvent the peasant activity away from domination dynamics, through both an active critical reflection on the historical processes that led to their oppression, and by explicitly interlacing their relationship to the land and territory with their Indigenous identity, traditions, beliefs, and values (Solano, 2005). Control of territory is in fact central to achieving and sustaining autonomy and resistance and goes hand in hand with social and cultural reproduction (Baronnet et al., 2011). While the land is crucial to achieve self-sufficiency, it is also valued in its affective and historical aspects as “Motherland.” Both dimensions are strengthened by traditional ecological beliefs and bring ecology to the centre of communities’ politics (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). The land is thus multi-dimensional, interlacing the natural world and its intrinsic values, with its cultural implications, subsistence economy and an identity-bound territoriality.

The notion of community, which in the local Tzeltal language comes from the words “our land,” is central to the Zapatista organization (Stahler-Sholk, 2011). The community is organized around assemblies which are decision-making spaces and allow encounters and interactions between families, as well as the *Milpa* – the field – the basis of the Zapatista subsistence agriculture (Paoli, 2003; Stahler-Sholk, 2011).

Further, to build their autonomy the Zapatistas have replaced State education with their own system, designed by the communities themselves and aiming at bettering the living conditions in the communities and the future prospects of their youth. While state education was blamed for homogenizing and marginalizing Indigenous cultures, languages and participatory practices, as well as for being irrelevant to local cultures and needs and of poor quality, this new education, adapted to local realities, aims at preserving

traditions and values such as collectivism, companionship, relationship with nature, and dignity (Barmeyer, 2008; Gómez Lara, 2011; Núñez Patiño, 2011). It is an integral part of the Zapatista political organization. It is integrated organically into the local community's life, culture, needs and informal learning arenas, through the direct participation of its members in the education project. The concept of school itself is redefined, as the learning process permeating all areas and levels of the organization, from formal to informal arenas and across generations (Baronnet, 2015; Gómez Lara, 2011).

The Norwegian context: Rural culture and outdoor education

Community and rurality are also important in the Norwegian context. Historically, the country's specific topography, which isolated communities from each other, allowed strong local identities and peasant culture to develop. These were further strengthened when the development of modern transportation allowed them to come in contact with urban, bourgeois culture. The sense of belonging to a peasant community, together with the concern for preserving local rights and interests from the intrusion of a bourgeois class and urban culture, fostered strong political awareness and engagement among Norwegian peasants (Munch, 1954). A sense of pride for rural culture and traditions developed and was further glorified by the 19th century national romanticism movement. This movement praising the natural and authentic gave birth to philosophies such as *deep ecology* in the early 20th century, and turned rurality into an emblem of the true Norwegian (Buaas, 2012; Munch, 1954; Witoszek, 1997). Unfortunately, the expansion of agriculture and peasant culture through the Norwegian territory significantly impacted the nomadic Indigenous people present for centuries on these territories, the Samis, who have seen their modes of living, culture and lands threatened and reduced over the years (Riseth, 2003).

This cultural heritage explains the long Norwegian tradition of including outdoor education in school practices (Remmen & Iversen, 2022). In fact, the framework plan for kindergartens describes fostering positive nature experiences and cultivating ecological values as the kindergartens' foundational values (Buaas, 2012; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). This is achieved by spending time outdoors all year long and in all kinds of weather and through various pedagogical activities (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). Outdoor activities are described as good for children's health, development, social skills and to learn about sustainable development. Educators' role in that respect is to support children's understanding and curiosity for natural phenomena by engaging in meaningful conversations and providing scientific knowledge (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017).

The framework plan also states the importance for children to experience the feeling of belonging to a community, locally and globally. It underlines the kindergartens' role in providing experiences that allow children to develop knowledge of their cultural heritage, including the Norwegian local cultural and historical roots as well as multicultural aspects

of Norwegian society. Fostering this sense of belonging is described as necessary for their future democratic participation in society (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017).

Further, the cooperation between farms and schools have received an increased attention in the past 30 years through hundreds of projects aiming at increasing children's knowledge of food production and make rural, peasant knowledge available to children of urban areas (Krogh & Jolly, 2010). This is also done through gardening and foraging projects aiming at developing the environmental and cultural aspects of sustainability, and focusing on the pedagogical benefits of these activities (Bergan et al., 2021).

Theoretical frameworks

Place, belonging and the political dimension of ecology

As we perceive and sense the world, we humans are inextricably entangled with place. It becomes part of our internal landscape, and helps looking at nature and culture in unison, overcoming the dualisms of the external versus internal; physical and emotional; natural and cultural (Greenwood, 2019; Seghezze, 2009). This gives nature, the environment, an agentic role in the creation of notions of place, identity and belonging (Bonnett, 2013). This is particularly visible in Indigenous worldviews that are strongly embedded in place and the local, as they envision the relationship with nature in a continuum with principles of horizontality and reciprocity informing social relations and cultural practices as well. These worldviews and practices are, however, affected and sometimes endangered by the colonizing effects of globalized discourses that permeate the local (Greenwood, 2019).

Further, developing a sense of a place's historicity can deepen the emotional connection to it and give it meaning. In that sense, embedding oneself in both the place's and one's own past, participates intimately in the construction of one's identity (Greenwood, 2019; Næss, 2017). Through this sense of rootedness, acknowledging the historicity of a place can foster engagement with a temporal dimension of place which is also central to the idea of sustainability (Greenwood, 2019; Seghezze, 2009).

If this intimacy with the place we inhabit is important, looking at how the local is embedded in and interacts with the global and universal, is necessary to develop a critical understanding of reality (Freire, 2017; Næss, 2017). However, global phenomena such as climate change or biodiversity loss can appear abstract and difficult to feel directly concerned by. A strong sense of place may help cope with such abstractness and serve as a point of departure to reflect upon and engage with the world and its numerous crisis (Duhn, 2012). The sensed experience of natural degradation has a mobilising effect, where people's commitment to the place they inhabit and belong to seems strengthened and fuels political action, for instance through grassroot social movements. Being part of a

community seems in fact to provide the support necessary to fulfil goals of social change (Freire, 2017). Environmental issues and the growing environmental agenda of civil society have in turn contributed to strengthen a sense of belonging and engagement with ecology and ecological movements at both personal and social levels (Seghezzeo, 2009). This shows that, as it is linked to values about the environment and our place in nature, ecology is inevitably political (Næss, 2017).

Critical theory, Freire and the political educator

To engage with this political and critical dimension of ecology and sustainability, this work chooses the lens of critical theory. More specifically, it draws upon Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, that seeks to disrupt hegemonic and oppressive power relations, challenge the social order and build a more just society (Freire, 2017). Indeed, for him, if humans are conditioned by the socio-cultural context in which they are situated, they are not predetermined and can free themselves from the oppressions they are subjected to. The first step towards liberation is to become aware of this conditioning, and the material (local), and symbolic (ideological) contexts they operate within. This awareness must then be used to challenge the myths that the oppressors use to maintain the *status quo*. Besides, liberation through the joint action of consciousness and concrete attempts to transform reality, means humans have to engage in a pedagogical dialogue with others (Freire, 2017). This dialogue is a way to build community with others, as it requires humbleness and trust in others; horizontality, reciprocity and cooperation. Uniting with humans seeking liberation, strengthens a consciousness of class struggles and power relations, which helps counteract the depoliticizing, objectifying strategies of the oppressor and the social structure and culture in place (Freire, 2017). This dialogue seeks to transcend fatalistic conceptions of reality, by cultivating hope and faith in humans' ability and courage to transform it. It must be accompanied by critical thinking processes that dare to think of reality differently and to challenge the *status quo*. For Freire, teachers have a key role to play in that liberation process, as educators but also as citizens with democratic responsibilities (Freire, 2005).

Further, for Freire (2005) educators must develop a deep and holistic knowledge of themselves, and understand how their identity is embedded in a context encompassing the physical and geographical space, the material world, the classroom, as well as the more abstract socio-cultural space. These contribute to the individual's identity, values, understanding of the world and of their place in it. However, educators too are being oppressed and used to maintain and legitimize the oppressive structures in society (Freire, 2005, 2017). Indeed, the caring and nurturing aspect of their profession is often used to keep them focused on the day-to-day situations within the classroom, and away from engaging with societal issues. Such disempowerment can only be overcome if the educators start viewing themselves as political actors. This requires engaging both intellectually and affectively with the teaching profession. Confronting injustices and oppressive social structures

can be a daunting task, and requires courage from the educators, a quality that can only arise if they are convinced of their political role (Freire, 2005).

This framework will be instrumental in analysing the data presented below and discussing how peasant identity can come to foster educators’ political engagement with sustainability.

Methodology

A productive encounter between two contexts

Seeking coherence with key principles of critical theory such as awareness of power relations, and aims of promoting a more just society, a methodology of *bricolage* was chosen. Drawn from critical pedagogy, this approach is particularly adapted to education research. *Bricolage*, literally describing the process of crafting and piecing together an artifact using a variety of available tools, is also appropriate both from an epistemological, ideological and pragmatic point of view for this particular study (Kincheloe et al., 2011).

Indeed, it allows us to look at both contexts dialectically, making use of their salient differences to question taken for granted – Western – worldviews and produce new meaning and knowledge (Kincheloe et al., 2011). The encounter between the two contexts is rooted in decolonial principles seeking an “*enriching mutuality*” between Zapatista and Norwegian perspectives (Greenwood, 2019, p. 373).

Further, the *bricolage* approach acknowledges the complexity of phenomena and their situatedness within particular contexts. The inquiry process seeks to respect and give space to this complexity, by drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives, paradigms, sources, and tools. This makes it an active and creative task for the researcher who must assemble these and forge their own tools to collect data, all the while being open and receptive to change and unpredictability and how contexts and participants may give direction to the inquiry process (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Rogers, 2012).

Data collection and analysis

In the autumn of 2018 encounters with Zapatista educators, Zapatista and Mayan specialists, artwork, conferences, and first-hand experiences within Zapatista communities allowed to develop knowledge about the Zapatista organization, education, worldview as well as of the wider Mexican context. Later, research continued within a small Norwegian kindergarten of 13 employees located in a rural area of southwest Norway, through three phases from March 2019 to October 2020. In its totality the data material encompasses interviews, group discussions, observations, artistic and other visual representations, narratives, curriculum, pamphlets and reports. The results presented and discussed in this article are excerpts of interviews and conversations with educators in both contexts.

Following the *bricolage*, these data were collected mainly through a non-directive approach (Rogers, 2012). In this process notable differences between contexts and perspectives were made visible, and in perceiving creative ways in which these differences could help explore and create meaning, I was inspired by both the analogy of *diffraction* and the metaphor of the *rhizome* (Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The analogy of the diffraction process allowed me to envision how looking at sustainability education through the lens of Zapatista and Norwegian perspectives could help make new aspects, dimensions and meaning visible (Barad, 2007). The metaphor of the rhizome, as a horizontal root-structure, assisted me in opening up to ways in which the perspectives gathered in both contexts could connect and, by way of acknowledging their multiplicity and differences, produce new insights and help think creatively to produce meaning (Fox & Alldred, 2015). These analogies were used pragmatically to better grasp the multilayered and complex character of the topic at stake. This allowed the topics of place and peasant identity to naturally – and unexpectedly – emerge, as a bridge connecting both contexts, with a multiplicity of implications, reflections, and practices linked to them. The rich data material was then assembled through the process of identifying common themes and sub-themes. A “map” representing these, as well as their interconnections, was then created to facilitate their critical analysis. Three main areas were identified in this new “territory”. For practical purposes they are represented separately but are in fact interwoven, as they simultaneously build on and inform each other.

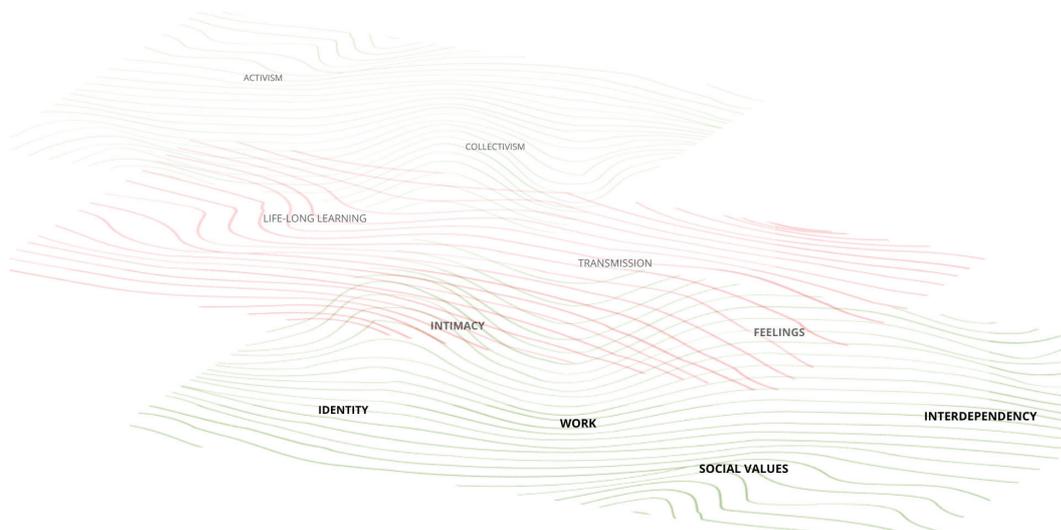


Figure 1. From being a peasant to being an educator and activist: Mapping place and the main themes as expressed in Zapatista and Norwegian contexts. *Green area*: Being a peasant. *Red area*: The peasant as educator. *Blue area*: The peasant and educator as political agent of change.

On the bottom layer the values linked to being a peasant are represented with the main categories of *identity*, *intimacy*, *feelings*, *work*, *social values*, and *interdependency*. The middle layer of the map represents the themes associated with the educating function of the peasant in both contexts. These are grouped under the categories of *transmission* and *life-long learning*.

And finally, on the top layer, the theme of the peasant-educator as political agent of change are placed on the map, with the main categories being *activism* and *collectivism*. These themes and sub-themes will be presented and discussed below.

Mapping place: Results and discussion

Being peasants: identity and values

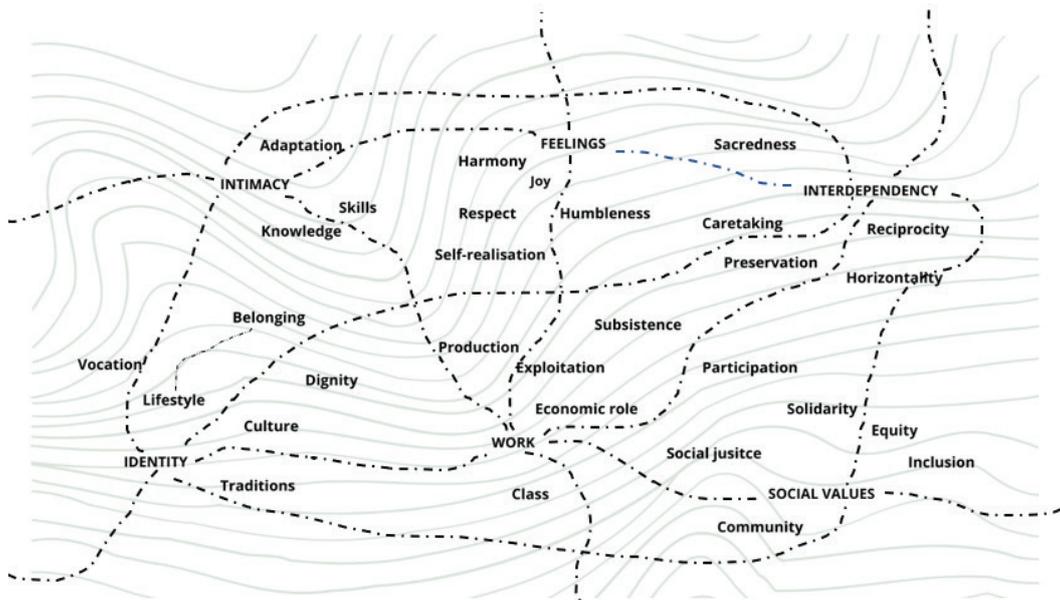


Figure 2. Connections between peasant identities and values. Mapping themes and sub-themes as expressed in Norwegian and Zapatista contexts.

For the Norwegian educators, being a peasant implies a privileged relationship with nature. Through their activity, peasants are in a daily, intimate contact with nature which helps them develop a deep and specific knowledge base. The relationship with nature is one of interdependency where humans depend on nature for their subsistence. They must develop a close knowledge of nature and its phenomena to be able to adapt to it. This dependency fosters respect and humbleness towards nature:

I am very humble towards nature and what it gives. I see that reciprocity with my mom and dad who are peasants, how they harvest, but they also give back, they give fertilizer, they give the soil peace and quiet [...], that's reciprocity.

According to these educators, the near relationship with nature also fosters other values, developed through “being in” nature. These are related to feelings, the senses, and are described as joy, harmony, love and care for nature. Developing this embodied relationship

to nature through “being in” it allows to be “here and now” and is seen as a human need linked to self-realisation.

Interdependency is also mentioned in terms of nature needing humans for her flourishing. The peasant’s activity is seen as a way of taking care of nature.

When I grew up in the village and on that farm, I was taught to take care of the land. [...] We were taught to take care of the grass so that it could grow [...]. So we were brought up to take care of the land on the farm so that there could be production and we could get the most growth and harvest out of it. [...] we learnt respect, that nature has a value.

Here, respect for nature and the need to protect it are linked to humans’ dependency on natural resources and the peasants’ role as producers.

Peasants are also described as having shared values and identity, that allow to feel belonging to a community of peasants. Being a peasant is described as a vocation implying a deep belief in the value of that work and lifestyle.

Being a peasant has also helped these educators develop social values. They link their social role to that of providing for the country’s wellbeing and are thus concerned with the economic role of the peasant and its status as worker in society. In that perspective, the closeness of peasants to nature is linked to their role as producers, and the sense of belonging it fosters. The peasant is viewed as a special kind of worker whose contribution to society ought to be acknowledged:

I think that to be a peasant you can’t only think about money and income, it must be part of your identity [...] you have to care in a different way than the way a factory worker cares about his work. It is a lifestyle; you are a peasant 24/7.

An awareness of society’s social classes has fostered in this educator a sense of pride, an acknowledgment of the importance of the peasant’s activity for society, as well as social values such as equity and social justice that one may bring along in other areas of one’s social life. Indeed, she mentions how her upbringing on a farm taught her values such as inclusion and social justice, that shape her sense of community:

I grew up with a mother who couldn’t understand why priests and politicians should be more important than peasants. And everybody was always welcome at my mother’s. [...] We are all of equal worth.

This educator’s views are embedded in a class discourse where she contests the supposedly inferior status of the peasant. These social values are reflected in her educative goals and engagement with the local community, both at personal and professional levels. Work is highly valued by this educator as the pillar of both society and personal fulfilment. It is associated with participation, which helps feeling that one contributes to society and fosters a sense of belonging to it.

In the Zapatista community the peasants’ production is only meant to provide for the community’s subsistence. To build their autonomy the Zapatistas returned to a system where they do not have to follow the capitalistic concept of work.

Originally, we don’t have the word “work.” We didn’t use it before. We have other systems. “A’mtel” is the most important one. It is a social relation, an activity which result returns to the community. The family’s and community’s needs of A’mtel are decided by agreement. Nobody can steal the result of A’mtel.

This is linked to a principle of horizontality in all relations, socially and with nature. A key Mayan concept for understanding this relationship is *Ch’ul*:

We have a word for this, “Ch’ul”, which we use to show this relationship. It also means that it is sacred. But with the conquest, and religion, this relationship got lost, [...] So we started to resist to defend our concepts and our relationship with nature [...]. Ch’ul means intersubjectivity and horizontality.

With sacredness, intersubjectivity and horizontality as leading principles, protecting the environment is obvious. In contrast, a loss of these values immediately engenders destruction:

This is why one can die defending the land, because the human isn’t superior. When one loses this sense of the sacred one stops using Ch’ul and the objectification of the world starts. But Ch’ul isn’t only a word, it is a way of relating to the world, it is coexistence. We must walk the talk; this is why we the Zapatistas are fighting for our autonomy.

As this educator reminds us, according to Mayan mythology,

the gods created the humans from maize. [...] We say that we are people of the maize. It is the base of our diet. So it is part of our bodies. Lack of maize also means death. [...] when we fight for the maize, we fight for our rights but also for our survival.

Here the non-human world is embodied within the human: nature’s wellbeing equates the wellbeing of humans, and its survival is embodied through the survival of humans.

Later, he explains that the sacredness of *Ch’ul* is related to the concept of *Ch’ulel*, which describes both a life force and consciousness, and which both humans and non-humans possess. *Ch’ulel* makes it impossible not to treat other beings with the respect due to subjects. Values towards nature are interwoven with social ones.

To summarize, in both contexts being a peasant is associated with a nearness to nature with its affective dimension as well as specific knowledge and skills, but with different implications.

Indeed, as the participants’ upbringing as peasants in place has forged their identity, their engagement with the environment is interwoven with social and cultural values. Following Freire (2017), these identities and values are also conditioned by the wider and

symbolic socio-cultural context which shapes humans' beliefs about society, themselves and how they should act in the world.

For instance, although the Norwegian educators describe their relationship with nature as one of interdependency and reciprocity, it is embedded in a Western instrumentalistic concept of nature as a realm separate from humans (Næss, 2017). The Zapatistas' Indigenous worldview, on the other hand, challenges this anthropocentric position. Being ecocentric and holistic, it values the intrinsic value of nature, and centres on a sense of synchronicity and togetherness viewed as necessary for the joint flourishing of both humans and non-humans (Bonnett, 2003).

This conditioning also applies to social roles such as work, how it should be organized and for what purpose (Freire, 2017). The Zapatistas' explicit rejection of the capitalist ideology and social structures is interesting in that respect and are coherent with Freire's claim that becoming aware of one's situatedness as historical being only leads to liberation if accompanied by concrete action (Freire, 2017): As they exclude the concept of work from their economic system, they show that they understand the historical character of their oppression, debunk the myth of the naturally inferior Indigenous and take concrete action to free themselves from the oppression they were forced into. The Zapatistas thus redefine the way being a peasant and building community are interwoven. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Norwegian participants show they are aware that the peasants' local realities are embedded in a wider context that gives them meaning, and of the peasant's place in society's fabric through their productive work. However, far from challenging the *status quo*, they seem to legitimize it.

The peasant's educative role

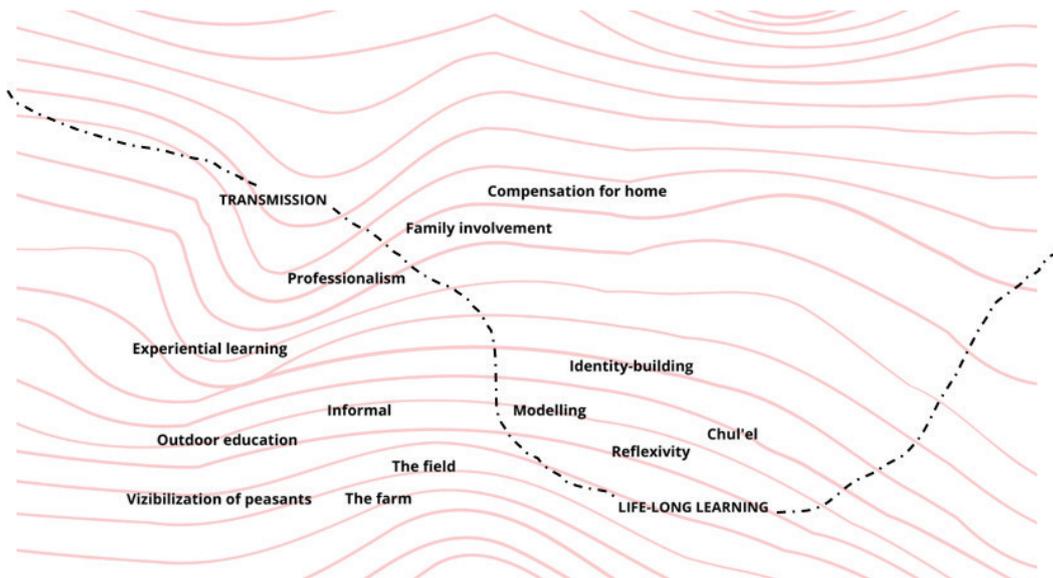


Figure 3. From being a peasant to being an educator: mapping themes and sub-themes as expressed in Norwegian and Zapatista contexts.

Reflexivity and life-long learning are two core principles of Zapatista education, essential to the community’s wellbeing: “*We value experience more than school. To be wise means to have experiences in the life you know, that orient you in life. Even if you never went through school.*” Education is viewed as a joint experience happening also, and mainly, outside of school. The main learning arena for children is in fact the community: the family, the open space, the corn field. Children learn through coexisting with other community members and observing how the social fabric as well as the relationship with nature, are held together.

In our education, children learn through coexistence. It’s not necessary to teach the concepts in a formal way. Children are always with us, and so they can see the rituals. I don’t need to say anything to teach the revolutionary thought to children. In reality, the adults, the parents, are also children within the movement! We are new, we always learn.

This principle builds the *Ch’ulel*, which does not develop spontaneously, but has to be supported.

The transmission of environmental values such as love and respect for nature seemed to be of high priority in the Norwegian kindergarten. This is rooted in the personal values of the educators. For them, developing these values depends on spending time in nature. These activities, combined with the knowledge passed on to children by these educators, contribute to developing a sense of belonging to the environment: “*[these activities] contribute to a feeling of safety, of being where you belong, knowing the environment you live in. I think we are building an identity in children.*”

Opening the learning arena beyond the walls of the kindergarten, the farm and land are viewed as learning and teaching arenas, complementary to the school:

If children aren’t having a good time here [in the kindergarten], children who have challenges [...] then it is very good for them, [...] to be able to come down there and play. [...] I think, it is us, the adults who create problems, when we keep them inside the kindergarten’s fence. [...] That’s just an institution, and it is boring.

Here, the educator challenges the assumption that the institution can be enough for a complete education.

The transmission of social values directly related to belonging and place are also crucial for these educators. First, they mention that: “*we should teach children the value of the work, it is a long process.*” Here she argues for visibilizing and acknowledging the peasant’s work and contribution to society.

Secondly, the combination of social values – inclusion, social justice and equity – described earlier, motivates the educators to foster a sense of belonging to a community within the kindergarten and with the local environment. Central to this is bridging the

gap between the personal and the professional and involving the parents in the kindergarten's life.

When it comes to the peasant's role, Norwegian educators argue that they should take an active role in educating others so that their contribution to society can be acknowledged and respected.

As peasants we were brought up to preserve nature and our planet, [...] but if you grow up in L., [...], then you don't learn it the same way. That's why it is important that we as a kindergarten talk about those things and teach children outside in nature.

This testimony suggests that, as peasants, these educators have a unique position, knowledge and insights that can serve to compensate the distance with nature that some families experience, and thus preserve environmental values.

To summarize, in both context the roles of peasant and educator are intimately linked, and the peasant dimension makes explicit the importance of place for education. For the Zapatistas, education happens first and foremost in the community, with the field as a central space for educating children in the community's core values and organization. In Norway, the participants' cultural and peasant background allows them to value education experiences outside the kindergarten, in nature, and on the farm. Including the local environment in the kindergarten's daily activities helps developing a common identity and a sense of belonging to place. Further, inviting adults and children on her farm, one of the educators suggests that providing children with something that is missing within the institution is not only necessary for their development and learning, but is also a matter of social justice. Building bridges between children and the reality they are a part of, and helping them develop an identity as members of the local community are viewed as part of the teachers' responsibility. From a Freirean perspective, grounding education experiences in the local environment is necessary for adults and children to become aware of their embeddedness into a specific reality, and of the complex workings of that reality (Freire, 2005). The focus of the educator-farmer on making children understand the production process on the farm and the value of work, can be viewed as an attempt to develop such awareness.

Besides, in Norway, the values associated with being both peasants and educators situated in place, strengthen a sense of responsibility to share these with others in order to strengthen a sense of belonging and shared identity, and the community itself. Opening the learning space to areas such as the farm or field is viewed as essential for human – and children's – flourishing. These educators claim the responsibility of putting their unique position, values and skills at the service of society, through their educative role and their relationship with the community. A sense of pride and dignity is attached to that culture which needs to be passed down for its survival. In the Zapatista context as well, the participants' testimonies show how education matters to attitudes and lifestyle within the

community and the movement. Educators are thus, in both context, aware of their role as cultural workers (Freire, 2005).

This work thus engages the educator both professionally and personally. Viewing these two dimensions in a continuum concurs with Freire’s advocacy for teachers to develop a holistic understanding of themselves as human beings, with both affective and cognitive qualities serving their role and purpose as cultural workers (Freire, 2005). Besides, for Freire (2005), if teachers are to transform reality for the better, they must cultivate their ability to dream creatively of the future. They must be aware of their responsibility, claim the crucial nature of their work and demand their contribution to society be taken seriously. The particular values, knowledge and skills of the Norwegian peasant, as well as the Zapatistas fight for the dignity of their Indigenous people to be acknowledged, are all reminders of that.

From belonging to political action

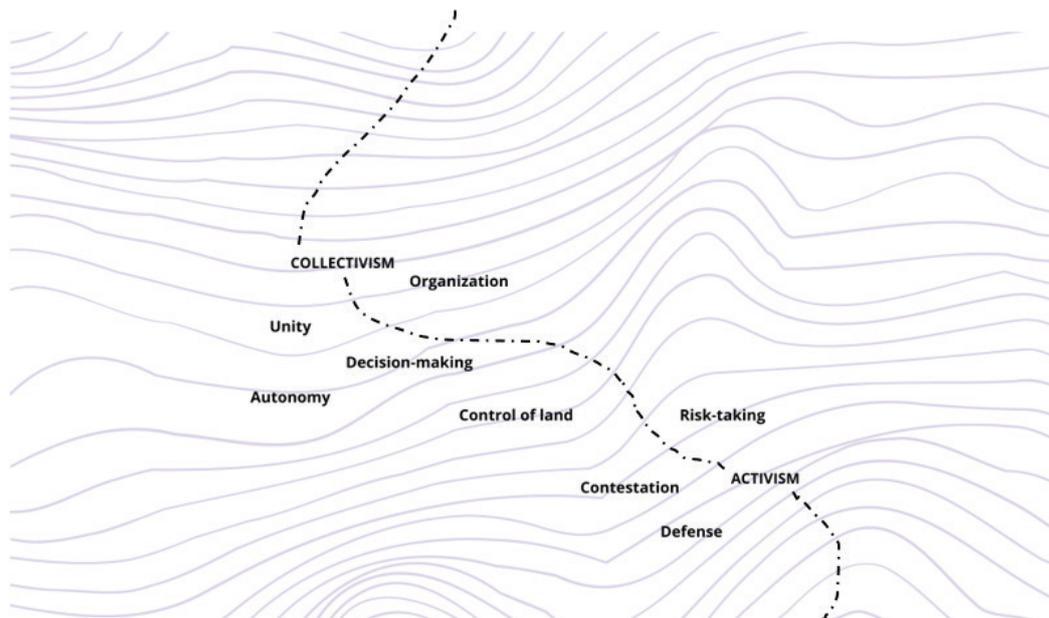


Figure 4. The educator as political actor: mapping themes and sub-themes as expressed in the Zapatista and Norwegian contexts.

In Norway, during the research period, the local authorities made the decision to close the kindergarten and relocate all children into a bigger unit some kilometres from there. The kindergarten and the parents came together as community to resist this decision. Their collective* efforts convinced the authorities to keep the kindergarten open.

We fight for the school, we fight for the village and our local environment, and our unity. [...] Parents and people of L engaged to save the kindergarten. They don't want to travel to V, it's 1,5 kilometres away [...]. There is no community, [...] it isn't their local environment.

Here the kindergarten is key to the local community. It is a place where the community meets and where its social values unfold. A threat on the kindergarten is a threat to the community's cohesion. "Belonging" was thus what brought these local actors to engage politically in local decision-making.

At the beginning of the project this educator located political decision-making at the level of the political system and administration, and she viewed her impact on society in terms of her day-to-day practices, modelling, and transmitting her values to children. Because of this dramatic turn of events, she later came to view the political dimension of sustainability in another light: not as a realm external to hers, but as something in which she too was engaged. Besides, political participation is here described as a fight, something of a contestation nature. Participation is no longer viewed only in terms of work and life-style, but in organizing with others to induce change through mobilization around common values and place.

For the Zapatista, the community is both the initiator and the receiver of social cohesion and integration. The notion of place and belonging are key in that respect, as practices, understandings, traditions are interwoven with a territoriality-bound identity. Mayan peoples refer to their language as Bats'ik'op, which an educator translated to me as "*The word which comes from here, which is true.*" Authenticity, truth, is thus associated with what is contextually meaningful and relevant, the place, in terms of land, but also in terms of community.

For us the struggle is everything. Fighting is to put in practice the word of the community. In Tsotsil, to think and to fight are the same word. So, to realise the thoughts is the root of the fight. This brings autonomy. But it must be the result of an agreement, no of an imposition. Because imposition makes thinking disappear, and the community too. Weapons must be the last resort [...]. Thinking is the weapon.

The role of the peasant, embedded in an Indigenous identity, is to rebel, contest and fight against the system which locked them within an "inferior" and subjugated peasant class. Being rooted into place is what fuels and legitimizes organizing politically and engaging in a fight for survival.

To summarize, by redefining their interaction with their territory, the Zapatistas resist the State's development politics and show that cultivating the land and cultivating agricultural, ecological and political knowledge go hand in hand (Baronnet et al., 2011; Gómez Bonillo, 2011). Autonomy is a strategy to safeguard local decision-making processes over the environment and its resources, and also to preserve local identities and cultural practices (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). This political struggle is rooted in an ecocentric worldview and the horizontal relationship to nature which legitimizes the idea that one can "die for the land" (Stahler-Sholk, 2011).

In Norway, belonging to a community at a local level was what brought parents and educators to engage politically with local decision making. Being confronted with what

they perceived as an injustice mobilized their common ethical and social values which allowed them to cooperate and organize as political actors to resist and turn ideals into action just as Freire (2017) would advocate.

Concluding words

This article has explored how peasant culture can strengthen the transformative goals of sustainability education, through the political engagement of the educator with place. The results and discussion presented here inspire three main questionings concerning sustainability education:

First, this work has shown how, whether a school, a field or a farm, education spaces first and foremost are places to intervene in the world. In fact, the Zapatistas remind us that for the majority of the world's population the stakes of engaging with land through cultivation and other land-based activities, go far beyond pedagogical objectives, and are about survival and resisting oppression. The question of what kind of relationship with land is fostered in educational contexts and practices should be reflected upon. Creating bonds with the peasant culture that go beyond the recreational and pedagogical aspects of gardening and outdoor education, but also foster ecological and political values within members of the community seems crucial.

This work does not argue for copying the Zapatistas, but for finding back to knowledge and values that make sense culturally and are relevant contextually. Further, being a peasant or educator is associated with specific social structures such as classes and power relations. Building a conscious relationship to land and rurality may foster an awareness and understanding of how, as workers within an institution, educators are embedded in this structure but can also challenge it. Community does not only form in place; it is a place in itself, where dialogue and cooperation and hope can be nurtured and through which transformative action towards sustainability can take place (Freire, 2017). Reclaiming *Place* and the local can thus be used to critique, challenge and resist hegemonic discourses of oppressive nature (Greenwood, 2019)

Secondly, while this article has focused on rurality and peasant identity, and the relationship with land that these foster as one, privileged way of engaging with place, it is important to further explore other ways of engaging with these questions for those who do not have similar relationships or access to land. This questioning is important also in regards to displaced and uprooted populations (Greenwood, 2019). For the Norwegian educators, although, as we have seen, outdoor traditions are deeply engrained in education practices, discussions about how to preserve, renew and negotiate the outdoor traditions in the context of an increasing multicultural society seem important (Remmen & Iversen, 2022).

Finally, as we have seen place helps create affective relationships with the environment, with ourselves and with others. These emotional values are what eventually allow humans to engage politically with an environment that matters to them. It thus appears important to give space for educators to explore this affective dimension, together with other transcendental and existential questions. This would allow them to go beyond the practical and technical aspects of learning about the environment, which is part of educators' role but do not suffice to transform the way we relate to it. What is needed is actual experiences of place where humans -and educators- are allowed to be affected and moved by it (Greenwood, 2019). Engaging with place may thus disrupt the separation between private, public and professional spheres (Bergdahl & Langmann, 2017). Indeed, ecology's holistic principles encourage to make space for educators to bring their whole selves into their educating profession, to engage emotionally with its purpose, with ecological as well as social values. This can help educators overcome the romantic view of their profession as a nurturing space free from politics and empower them to take action (Freire, 2005).

Author biography

Léa Marie Maison is a PhD candidate at the faculty of Early Childhood Education and Care, University of Stavanger, Norway. Her professional experience as an early childhood teacher together with studies in pedagogy, development studies and international education, have developed her interest for the political dimension of education. This shaped the topic of her Master's thesis which she completed in 2016 for the University of Oslo, entitled: "Children's right to participate in Early Childhood Education and Care: A comparative study of educators' perspectives in Mexico and Norway."

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