



Weaving Regenerative Education: A Reflection from the Pacific Coast of Mexico

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CONTEXT

This chapter refers to an educational project located in four rural communities in the Juluchuca micro-watershed within the state of Guerrero, Mexico (see Image 30.1). The largest community in this geographical area is Juluchuca, located at the mouth of the watershed and comprising roughly 700 inhabitants. The smallest community, Las Placitas, only has sixty-five residents and is located in the upper watershed, roughly twenty kilometers from the coast along a winding dirt road. Between Juluchuca and Las Placitas are two additional towns—Rancho Nuevo and La Ceiba—with 400 and 100 residents, respectively.

The climate in this region is classified as dry tropical, with expected rains each day from May to early October and clear skies the rest of the year. However, climate change and land use have affected these natural cycles, increasing the dry months and limiting rainfall to sporadic

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Image 30.1 Location of the Juluchuca micro-watershed in Guerrero, Mexico

torrential rains due to major climatic events such as hurricanes and tropical cyclones.

Residents in these four communities largely work in agriculture and cattle ranching, subsistence fishing, or a few small industries such as the coconut candy factories or the nearby salt flats. Over the past decade, residents have increasingly been able to find work in the tourist industry as the popularity of the beaches north of Juluchuca continues to grow among national and international visitors.

Playa Viva, located just three kilometers from Juluchuca, is a regenerative project which seeks to bring back a state of abundance to the area, restoring a balance between people and the environment. The Regenerative Education Project at Playa Viva was born with a mindset of integration and collaboration: a boutique hotel, a permaculture farm, and social and environmental impact programs are rooted in whole systems thinking and a connection to place with a strong commitment to integrate the communities of the watershed and contributing to their social, economic, and environmental well-being.

In this context, Playa Viva's team understand that democratic education is both an opportunity and a bridge to make visible those communities that have been living under scarcity and marginalization for decades.

Juluchuca is one of many places in Mexico where students are also workers; many times, their fate is shaped by where they come from. Playa Viva work is grounded in the conviction that one's origin should never dictate their destiny.

Democratic education is a pretext to talk deeply about the social and educational challenges of Mexican schools: where migration, high levels of dropouts, lack of teachers, abandoned schools, low levels of literacy and numeracy, absence of early childhood programs, and young students who prefer to be connected to criminal groups rather than attend school are commonplace.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Playa Viva conducted a survey in two of the local communities to learn how to best support the development of the region. Respondents shared a variety of ideas, but one message became clear: the need to invest deeply in the education of their communities. Playa Viva focused on attracting talent that could connect more closely with residents and develop a robust education program. The arrival of two experts, Colleen and Ariel, in 2018, was instrumental in the development of the social and environmental impact program. With backgrounds in sociology, psychology, education, and environmental studies, Colleen and Ariel prioritized becoming part of the communities before developing or proposing any solutions to community challenges.

Once activities flourished in Juluchuca, it felt only natural that projects expand from the lower coastal region to the upper part of the watershed. Once again, this process was organic and spontaneous. Teachers and families requested that Ariel incorporate an English program in the three communities dotting the watershed: Rancho Nuevo, La Ceiba, and Las Placitas. Each has a multi-grade primary school where the total number of students per school did not exceed eighteen students. These schools are isolated, difficult to reach, under-resourced, and forgotten by the education authorities, but they are also extremely close-knit, and families deeply value their children's education.

As Playa Viva's team began to collaborate with these schools, we understood the intertwined nature of the communities which literally depend on, and live off, the same river and are part of the same watershed. All residents want the best for their children and worry about their future in a fast-changing world. Yet despite these similarities, each community lives in

a rather isolated and insular way, a cultural distance separating Juluchuca, a large coastal town at the base of the watershed, and the communities in the mountains and the apex of the watershed.

THE PILLARS OF REGENERATIVE EDUCATION

At the beginning of 2021, a team of experienced, multidisciplinary practitioners across Mexico came together in Juluchuca to create ReSiMar (Regenerando Sierra y Mar¹), a systematic and holistic effort to regenerate the environment, economy, and community well-being. The ReSiMar strategy includes five nodes—water, fisheries, permaculture, ecosystem restoration, and regenerative education—and is deeply rooted in the strong ties built between Playa Viva and the communities in the Juluchuca watershed.

What does it mean to regenerate from an educational perspective? Regenerative education starts with the recognition of being part of a living ecosystem and taking action to help that ecosystem flourish. Regenerative education fosters awareness of our interconnection and interdependence, both with human and with non-human life, and by internalizing this, it means moving from a mindset of judgment and isolation to an embodiment of empathy and collaboration.

Regenerative education brings its knowledge from broad theories and adaptation mostly of *Regenerative Life* by Carol Sanford. Four guiding principles are considered for regenerative education: (1) **regenerate**, as the main purpose and the one that frames all the actions; the one intended to engage and empower local leaders is (2) **enable**; a place where all genders, ages, and backgrounds have a place is (4) inclusion; and to ensure the integration of cultural values embracing that all contexts are different is (4) **preservation**.

The regenerative education node has considered these four guiding principles but also added some values that could transversally be included in all education activities, such as living with purpose, connecting to yourself to connect with nature, being able to learn in any stage of their lives, have the joy of learning, revitalizing learning processes, promoting a sense of belonging, feeling proud of the land you were born and raised, visualizing the relations that happen in any learning environment, and recovering learning communities.

¹ In English, this roughly translates as “regenerating the sea and the mountains”.

The node pretends to reallocate the context, for one that is full of hope, that fights disillusionment, embraces possibilities, and heals situations. So, any place, school, or land that shares these and many other values that can be added is already regenerating its education model. Regenerative education is a provocation to reshape the conversation about what education should look like and not only to center all the actions, resources, activities, and learning objectives in kids that are the present but to help them reflect on the changes that need to happen to live in a better and healthy world. Their world.

LAS PLACITAS AND A TEACHER TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Maestro Belén is breaking down some of the many barriers in Juluchuca; a native of La Ceiba (in the upper watershed) and current resident of Juluchuca, Belén has been the lead teacher at the Emiliano Zapata rural primary school in Las Placitas for six years. A close-knit community of just sixty-five residents, Las Placitas quickly became the launching point for a Regenerative Education Project.

Every day since 2016, Maestro Belén travels an hour by motorcycle on a winding dirt road up the mountain to teach grades first to sixth to eighteen eager students. With a background in engineering, Maestro Belén never envisioned being a teacher, but on a visit back to Juluchuca, he was asked by the parents of Las Placitas if he could teach at their school because the government claimed that the number of students was too small to allocate a government teacher. Belén agreed and taught at the school for five years, where he discovered his passion for teaching. Belén then went back to school to get another degree in education to become eligible for the government *plaza*, or official teaching post. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy and institutional complexity of the educational system of Guerrero² have prevented him from securing his government-appointed teaching position; however, thanks to the support of Playa Viva guests, private funding was secured to offer him a salary to continue his important work.

Belén's passion and love for education are evident in every pore of his skin. His students respect and love him, as do their parents and other

² One of the four states out of thirty-two in Mexico with the lowest results in education, poverty, and inequalities. Not to say that the teacher's union plays a very important role in the decision-making process.

leaders in the community. Working in conditions with little infrastructure, resources, and materials, Maestro Belén finds a way to create didactic learning environments. Playa Viva is occasionally able to facilitate donations to the school, and on one of those visits, when asked what to do with the supplies, Maestro Belén shrugged his shoulders and said, “Ask the children what they want to do with the materials. They are the ones who will use it.”

With this simple gesture, Maestro Belén has shown his way of understanding the role of a teacher and the importance of giving students freedom, voice, and responsibility for making decisions and for their own learning processes rather than a teacher imposing answers on them. Belén has shown signs of being an extraordinary teacher by vocation, but he is not alone. He always emphasizes the crucial role played by the parents of students, who are continuously involved in the education of their children, despite limited resources.

Las Placitas School (LPS) may lack an abundance of didactic materials or comfortable spaces, but the environment in which learning takes place has views of the Sierra Madre Mountains, and from its classroom, students listen to the constant murmur of the river outside the school. Birds sing overhead and feed on the mangoes from the large tree that provides shade to the outdoor play area. The Las Placitas community has a deep sense of cohesion and mutual support among the families and the children feel safe at home and see the school as a meeting place, where they discover, learn, and play.

WALKING THE TALK OF A REGENERATIVE EDUCATION

The Regenerative Education Project was born in LPS where Maestro Belén’s work triggered a renewed focus on education. The school shines a light on all the people who remind us how to relate to the earth and to other human beings through their daily actions. These are the stories told by grandparents about the abundance of this place—the fertility of the soil and the generosity of the water. They are the traditions that unite people, the simplicity of life, and the value of sharing quality time with loved ones. The true essence of the Regenerative Education Project of the Juluchuca watershed is to remember where we come from, nourish ourselves with that wisdom, and ignite courage in the hearts of youth to imagine a future that excites us all.

LPS struggles with structural deficiencies due to unequal opportunities and gender discrimination, alcoholism, the presence of organized crime, the destruction of virgin forests, and excessive exploitation of natural resources. The students are used to learning outside, and to playing in the mud. The mission of LPS is to place learning through play as a core value to raise students', teachers', and families' consciousness about their environment, history, and inheritance.

Since 2020, LPS has been rethinking the whole curriculum and its values. Sadly, in Mexico, there is only one way of learning: the one that is delivered and created by the Federal Ministry of Education. The LPS is a small but sound example of how the community can promote change. The Regenerative Education Project has been reviewing values such as living with purpose, the joy of learning, sense of belonging, coevolution, dealing with uncertainty, appreciating reality, enabling transformation, committing passionately to understand how nature works, and creating consciousness on how to make change even if the context is surrounded by adversity.

Then, the LPS has a new and local curriculum far away from the national standards, and the challenge is not only to comprise the context but to enable new ways of learning based on the needs of the students. The curriculum has an important emphasis on socioemotional methodologies, and it is divided into three different parts where playtime, outdoor learning, mindfulness, project-based learning, music, and arts are core pillars of this learning process up in the watersheds.

GOING BEYOND: THE REGENERATIVE EDUCATION LABORATORY (REL)

In this regard, regenerating the schools of the Juluchuca watershed focuses on social inclusion and building a vision of educational opportunities from the perspective of the communities, never from the eyes of experts or specialists. The vision is to build an educational model that centers the dreams, visions, and aspirations of children and youth, parents, and caregivers. Regenerative education means making the voices of each one of the members of the community and the route to follow, to trace, and to dialogue.

The involvement of the community, the importance of the context to build language and identity, sharing best and local practices, and learning from the communities were the most important criteria for forming the Regenerative Education Laboratory (REL) within ReSiMar. Initially, an

interdisciplinary team of participants and experts from all over Mexico and abroad was formed with the common goal of reconciling views and understanding the context of Guerrero.

Poverty, marginalization, and social challenges have a decisive impact on the educational agenda and in their case are also a reason for school exclusion. In Juluchuca and in the towns that have been mentioned above, there are several children and adolescents who have dropped out of the educational system. The economic activities of the region have affected the way the school is valued. Leaving the system has become an easy path, as the need to look for an income and to have better living conditions is more common than at any other time in the history of the region. Guerrero is one of the most important states of migration.

The Laboratory makes visible that the Juluchuca watershed is a microcosm of what is happening in the entire Pacific coast of Mexico and probably in many other rural watersheds in Latin America. The members of the REL facilitated the creation of content to build the regenerative education model, but also suggested a structure in the social and environmental impact team of Playa Viva that set the challenge of drawing educational action frameworks in three dimensions: local, regional, and national. The concept of “Regenerative Education” encompasses the territory, the educational challenge, and the possibilities for the future.

The Regenerative Education Laboratory extends beyond the local Juluchuca River—the team has begun working with people from other watersheds in the country, opening space for tremendous learning and exchange of knowledge and experience. Regenerative education requires commitment among peers and investment in the human capital of communities. As part of the actions of the REL, a water education program will be incorporated in the Juluchuca watershed after Maestro Belén and team members visit other rural communities in the state of Oaxaca to incorporate the WET course (Water Education for Teachers) into the classrooms.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Regenerative education places children as the protagonists and owners of their own learning. This is the beginning of a desirable democratic education stage when aimed to think about reconnecting to their own heritage. The kids and youth are the present and the future of their own lands. Highlighting the significance of actively listening to their voices and

fostering an environment that encourages them to articulate their ideas, voice their concerns, and share their challenges. Children dream, and they should be seen as the instigators of other conversations, as the decision-makers, and as the seeds to confront upcoming challenges. The regenerative education model and the regenerative education laboratory are the leverages that aim to nurture the present generations together from grandparents' vision to grandchildren's transformation.

There are many challenges in this and many other watersheds—at school, at home, in the community, and in changing weather patterns. But, there are many other and bigger problems in the world; so many that sometimes they overwhelm us. But there is always hope, which is love's way of projecting itself into the future, a future that is looking more and more regenerative each day. And if we pay attention, nature always gives us moments that will remain engraved in our minds and hearts.

Can you imagine the conversations, the sounds, the smells of the Juluchuca watershed on the Mexican Pacific coast? Regenerative education on this side of the world arose from a project and a team that wanted to get closer to the communities. Now, the teachers, students, and parents have taken the lead in listening to what they feel and expressing what the community has inside because regenerating truly means unlearning to coincide again as one.

The youth of these communities have the unconditional support of Maestro Belén, who embodies the importance of social cohesion and harmony to unite the watershed on its regenerative journey. The communities located along the Juluchuca River are the guardians of their *arroyo* (river) and their natural resources, and in their own way, they are contributing to a much larger effort toward democracy and environmental resilience.

REFERENCE

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