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Publication Date

2024-12-09

Research Brief

Supporting the Educational Experiences of Indigenous Students and Families: The Case of Maya Migrants from Yucatán in the San Francisco Bay Area

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October 9, 2024

Background and Significance

One of the most important guarantees in the United States is the right to a free, equal K-12 education. Even before the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, the *Mendez v. Westminster* federal desegregation case of 1946 argued that “a paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality” and that education “must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage.”² This requisite has led to policies that have sought to integrate schools and make efforts to recognize the histories and cultural assets and the struggles and contributions of historically marginalized people of the state of California and the United States. Multicultural education is but one example that has focused on recognizing the histories of minoritized populations in schools and which is now extending into ethnic studies curricula. In 2016, voters in the state of California passed Assembly Bill (AB) 2016 which now requires an ethnic studies curriculum for grades 7-12.³ In a state where the Latinx⁴ student population is 3,284,788 or 56.1% of all students in the state,⁵ the new

ethnic studies requirement invites a deeper study of the diversity of histories and cultures of Latine students in our California schools. This focus should also include the growing, but largely overlooked, population of Indigenous students from Mexico, Central American, and South America, who are often subsumed under the category of Latinx upon entry into the school system. Of particular relevance to the schools in the San Francisco Bay Area (or the greater San Francisco metropolitan area) is the large population of Indigenous Maya from Yucatan, Mexico, estimated to be at 30,000.⁶ Many immigrants from Yucatan speak their Indigenous language, Yucatec Maya, but like other groups in migration, there is always a risk of intergenerational language loss. A review of the growing body of literature on Indigenous students, and Indigenous students from Yucatan in particular, offers a view into the educational challenges and possibilities facing these children and youth in our schools.

Indigenous Students in U. S. Schools

The literature on Indigenous students in U.S. schools points to educational inequities in the type of education that students experience in public

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² For more information consult: <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/mendez-v-westminster>

³ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB2016

⁴ We use the ending “x” and “e” in Latinx/e to avoid the grammatical and ideological binary of the term Latina/o.

⁵ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp>

⁶ <https://www.asociacionmayabsf.com/>

schools, some stemming from anti-Indigenous sentiments deeply entrenched in Latin America and in the U.S. (Perez et al., 2016). Indigenous students from Guatemala face particular challenges given that they are also part of refugee and asylee populations or are themselves unaccompanied minors (Almasalkhi, 2021; Barrillas Chon, 2022; Canizales, 2021; O'Connor & Canizales, 2023). A growing body of research focusing on Indigenous Maya students originating from Yucatan also identifies practices of exclusion in peer groups and in schools, especially in processes of return migration either to Mexico or to the U.S. where they experience the effects of stigma around perceived low-level language competencies in the absence of strong bilingual literacy programming in either country (Jacobo, 2017; Cruz-Manjarrez & Baquedano-López, 2020). Despite these challenges, research reports also indicate that Indigenous students persist in our educational system and many seek to remain connected to their Indigenous roots (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013; Pérez et al., 2016; Ruiz & Barajas 2012, Sanchez, 2018), including Indigenous Maya students whose families originate from Yucatan (Baquedano-López & Méndez, 2023; Casanova 2019, 2022; Casanova et al., 2021). Like all students in our schools, Indigenous Latinx students deserve equal and supportive access to education where they can be recognized for the valuable assets they have and bring to our schools, including a rich Indigenous heritage and multilingual skills.

The Yucatan-California Maya Diaspora: The San Francisco Bay Area

The presence of Indigenous Maya immigrants from Yucatán in California dates back to the

Bracero program (1942-1964) when Mexican labor was recruited to strengthen manual work in the agricultural fields and railroad construction during World War II. U.S immigration and international trade policies in the 80s and 90s contributed to an increase in internal migration within Yucatan and to the U.S. In particular, the amnesty opportunities afforded by the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1984 for those already living in the U.S. facilitated processes of family reunification. In Yucatan, the economic opportunities of the North American Fair Trade Agreement created a boost in short-term employment, which contributed to rural to urban migration. The major sisal rope industry of the region suffered an irreversible economic crisis in the mid 90s that mobilized people to seek jobs in the tourist areas of what is now known as the “Maya Riviera” along the Mexican Caribbean coast (Castellanos, 2010; Lewin Fischer, 2007). In tandem, the sale of Indigenous land to third parties for tourist or economic development also increased during this period leaving many Indigenous families without land to cultivate or develop creating further incentives to migrate to urban centers or to the U.S. (Appendini, 1996; Fox & Rivera Salgado, 2004; Stephen, 2007) strengthening the Maya diaspora between Yucatan and California.

The growing population of Indigenous Maya immigrants from Yucatan in the San Francisco Bay Area was first reported in local newspapers (Burke, 2002; Hendricks, 2003). At the time, Asociación Mayab⁷ in San Francisco, a non-profit organization established in 2004 serving the Maya community, estimated the population of Maya people from Yucatan in the San Francisco Bay Area to be 25,000. More recently the estimate has grown to 30,000. As a key Indigenous community organization⁸ supporting Maya immigrants (from Yucatan and from other regions), Asociación

⁷ <https://www.asociacionmayabsf.com/>

⁸ There are associations in California that support other Indigenous communities such those from the state of

Oaxaca in Mexico: The Mixteco Indigenous Community Organizing Project (<https://mixteco.org/staff/>) and the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations.

Mayab offers many services to the community and to those who interface with Maya immigrants, including hosting a language interpreter program (in Mayan languages, English, and Spanish). In previous years, the association also offered Yucatec Maya language courses, which the first author, Patricia, took. Despite reports of Indigenous Maya presence in newspapers and in cultural and civic activities in the San Francisco Bay Area such as the celebration of traditional *jarana* dances at *vaquería* events,⁹ the naming of a park with a name in Yucatec Maya “Chan Kaajal” (“my little town”), and the participation of Maya groups in city-wide activities such as the San Francisco Carnaval, Indigenous Maya students and their families remain undercounted in schools and in demographic surveys.

U.S. Census data on Indigenous immigrant populations has been difficult to ascertain. In many cases, this is due to the undocumented status of this population as well as local (temporary) mobility, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ While limited, the U.S. Census category that identifies Mexican-American and Indian population (still difficult to determine) shows a growth worth noting in a five year period for counties of northern California as illustrated in Table 1.¹¹ We also note the dramatic undercount of this population for San Francisco county despite a growing presence in the city and its extended metropolitan area. In some counties, Indigenous populations grew exponentially, such as Contra Costa and Santa Clara.

⁹ See reports of these events in Yucatan news: <https://www.yucatan.com.mx/merida/2022/5/31/yucatecos-realizan-vaqueria-en-el-carnaval-de-san-francisco-fotos-323584.html>

¹⁰ See Cesario, C. (2014) on the tension experienced by Maya leaders and migrants between the need and desire to be counted in the U.S. Census and the anxiety of possible outcomes of such recognition: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76388832.pdf>

Table 1. Mexican-American Indian Population in Bay Area Counties

	<u>2015</u>	<u>2021</u>	Growth (%)
1. Alameda	1,374	1,370	-0.3
2. Contra Costa	691	2,331	237.3
3. Los Angeles	16,615	35,104	111.3
4. Marin	172	250	45.3
5. San Francisco	357	652	82.6
6. Santa Clara	782	3,341	327.2
7. Ventura	1,743	4,459	155.8

Source: American Community Survey (U.S. Census) with 5-year Estimates, *American Indian and Alaska Native Alone for Selected Tribal Groupings*.

Institutional Challenges Experienced by Indigenous Students from Yucatan

Drawing from research in the education of Indigenous students in general, and Maya students from Yucatan in particular, we next identify 3 institutional challenges that Indigenous students encounter in schools and which limit their educational experiences. We do so to bring attention to these potential barriers to educational success and we discuss ways to counter them.

See also Garofoli (2020) for interviews with Maya Mam leaders on efforts to increase visibility of Indigenous people especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/We-are-invisible-Coronavirus-just-made-15203827.php>

¹¹ See also Perez et al., 2016 for similar Indigenous population growth comparisons between 2000-2010.

1. School Entry Processes that Misidentify Students

Indigenous students in general, and Maya students in particular, complete the Home Language Survey (HLS), which is primarily a metric of English competence. While the HLS can be locally tailored across districts in the U.S., in California it centers around 4 questions:

Table 2. Home Language Survey

1. Which language did your child learn when they first began to talk?
2. Which language does your child most frequently speak at home?
3. Which language do you (the parents and guardians most frequently use when speaking with your child?
4. Which language is most often spoken by adults in the home? (parents, guardians, grandparents, or any other adults)

Following a design to advance English proficiency, the information gathered in the HLS is used to administer the mandated English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) for determining English language proficiency (ELP) to students who indicated a primary language that is not English.¹² Students are thus identified as English learners or as initially proficient in English. The students are then placed in instructional programs to support their English language development and they must take the Summative ELPAC every year until they demonstrate proficiency in English to be reclassified as Fluent English Proficient. We note the documented slow reclassification rates

¹² See also the research brief by García Bedolla and Rodríguez (2011) on the educational limits of an earlier proficiency test, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

¹³ The decree, stemming from the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court case, required bilingual and bicultural

of English language learners and the categorization of these students as Long-Term English Learners (L-TEL). L-TEL students which refers to students who are continuously enrolled in English language acquisition or development instruction for 7 years or longer without becoming reclassified as English proficient (Brooks, 2020; IES, 2016). Many students with this last category encounter difficulties completing requirements, especially in the middle and high school years, for successful graduation or for being placed on a college-going track.

By relying on broad language categories outlined in the HLS (e.g., “which language did your child learn”) the ELPAC may also fail to account for students’ bilingualism or multilingualism as it is possible to learn to speak more than one language at the same time, and thus miss an opportunity to build on language assets. It also fails to recognize language varieties, such as the Spanish or English varieties spoken by first or second generation of speakers. The ELPAC only identifies English proficiency that is closest to the variety of English taught in schools known as standard English or academic English.

In the San Francisco Unified School District, following the end of the Lau Consent Decree in 2019,¹³ which required bilingual and bicultural education for English language learners in the district, new language programming has been introduced offering 11 language pathways including Arabic, Cantonese, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, French, Latin, and Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese. We note that none of these pathways is in an Indigenous language of the area (e.g., Ohlone, Miwok, Esslan or Pomo) or in the many Indigenous languages from immigrant families now populating local school districts

education for English language learners who spoke Chinese, Filipino, and Spanish in order to be in compliance with Title VI Civil Right Act of 1964, that is, to have equal access to educational programs receiving federal support.

including Yucatec Maya, Mam, Tzotzil, and Zapotec.

2. Minimization of Indigenous Identity, Language, and Culture

In addition to having limited to no experiences to learn or strengthen their Indigenous language, Maya students experience other challenges that minimize their indigenous identities. Indigenous people inhabit, come from, or have been displaced from territories that were theirs before people from other cultures or ethnic groups settled in their lands and conquered them.¹⁴ As we have been discussing, Indigenous Maya in migration have been displaced from their ancestral lands by land loss or economic policy and necessity. This is not unlike the histories of Indigenous groups in California who were relocated from Spanish and European colonialism of the 17th and 18th centuries and who continue to fight marginalization. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People underscores the responsibility of nation states to support and develop appropriate measures to ensure Indigenous children have access to an education provided in their own language, even when they live outside of their communities.¹⁵

Many Indigenous students from Latin America, including students from Yucatan, are categorized as Latinx upon entry into the U.S. Some are also identified as Latinx by virtue of their Spanish surnames even when they are Indigenous (Baquedano-López & Borge Janetti, 2017; Campbell-Montalvo, 2021). This is in part due to the history of Spanish colonization across the hemisphere, where Spanish last names and language were imposed on

Indigenous populations. These labels, however, fail to properly identify a population of students with distinct histories and experiences from Mexico, Central America, and Latin America, who may or may not speak Spanish or identify with the broader demographic in which they are categorized. In this way, Indigenous students are multiply re-labeled yet remain ethnically and linguistically misidentified.

The same processes that limit students' identities to the Latinx category also limits their multilingual possibilities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the period between 2022 and 2032 as the "Decade of Indigenous Languages" in a global effort to support Indigenous people and their languages. This effort recognizes that Indigenous languages are considered one of the main mechanisms that can help preserve Indigenous cultural practices, histories, and traditions. Our local schools in Northern California have opportunities to join this global effort and contribute to the preservation of Yucatec Maya in our schools, an Indigenous language with a rich millenarian history that enriches us all. Research conducted by the first author at a K-5 school in the Mission District of San Francisco documented a successful university-school partnership focused on activities that helped revalorize Yucatec Maya language and culture. Through routine activities and monthly parent workshops, Maya language lessons, and cultural events, students, parents, teacher, and staff learned about the Maya student population at the school (Baquedano-López, 2021, Godínez & Baquedano-López, 2022). This work exemplifies ways in which universities and schools can become actively involved and support the inclusion of Indigenous students and families.

¹⁴ For the general characteristics that define Indigenous people consult the United Nations Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5sessi on_factsheet1.pdf

¹⁵ See in particular Article 14 on Indigenous peoples' rights to education. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

3. Students' Transnational Educational Experiences Are Not Always Supported

A growing area of educational research has been focusing on the opportunities and challenges of binational education between Mexico and the U.S. for students who straddle two nation-states and their vastly different educational systems and languages. While there have been efforts to document these challenges and inform transnational public policy to better support these students, many challenges remain absent of coherent policy¹⁶ (Hamann et al., 2022; Jacobo, 2017; Rodríguez Cruz, 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2008). In the absence of supportive policy, for instance, students who have attended schools in Mexico and who are identified as limited proficient in English can be held back one grade (or more) with all the academic and social consequences, not to mention, indignities, that this decision entails (Valdés, 2022). The second author, Marisela, was held back one year in one such example of lack of supportive education policy between Mexico and the U.S.

To be sure, there have been institutional efforts to understand and begin to address the educational experiences of Indigenous students in general such as the report *California Department of Education report on Multilingual Students*¹⁷ which gathered information from a binational symposia led by the University of California (de la Torre, 2016) and newcomer programs supporting Indigenous Mam students in the Oakland Unified School District.¹⁸ Drawing on the description found in Jacobo (2017) regarding binational and return

migrant students to Mexico, as well as the education profiles of Maya students who return to the U.S., the following to be a representative description of the type of educational backgrounds of Indigenous Maya students:

Table 3. Educational Background of Students from Yucatan
1. Children born in Yucatan who attended school in the U.S. and who have returned to Yucatan
2. Children born in Yucatan whose education has been binational who have been enrolled in schools in both Yucatan and the U.S. and who have returned to Yucatan
3. Children born in the U.S. whose education has been binational and who return to the U.S.
4. Children born in the U.S. whose education has been solely in the U.S.

Source: Cruz-Manjarrez & Baquedano-López (2020)

We are at an important educational juncture in California with the recent passing of Proposition 58¹⁹ which overturns most of the restrictions around bilingual education in the state and gives districts more latitude on the design and implementation of multilingual education. Similarly, the new Ethnic Studies high school requirement can create a curricular space to include the history and presence of Indigenous students from Yucatan into the regular curriculum. We are hopeful that changes brought about by new policies and increased global attention to Indigenous communities and their languages may also bring expanded experiences for Maya students in our schools

¹⁶<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/events/2016/binational-symposium-the-students-we-share-los-estudiantes-que-compartimos>

¹⁷ See also California Department of Education, 2020. *Improving Education for Multilingual and English Learner Students: Research to Practice*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

¹⁸<https://www.kqed.org/news/11855640/how-native-speakers-are-helping-1300-mam-students-in-oakland-through-remote-learning>

¹⁹<https://web.archive.org/web/20161003175853/http://voter.guide.sos.ca.gov/en/propositions/58/>

Towards a Sustainable Model of Academic Support for Indigenous Maya Students

Drawing from the research we have referenced in this report, we offer a set of recommendations that can be used to design a sustainable model for academic support and greater visibility and cultural and linguistic inclusion of Indigenous students in Bay Area schools.

Table 4. Academic Supports for Indigenous Maya Students

Visibility and Inclusivity	Indigenous Language Pathways	School and Community Bridges	Transnational Education Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disaggregate data for Latinx/e enrollments and expand the HLS to include Indigenous Maya languages and identities Create and identify supportive communities within schools for newly enrolled Indigenous students (at grade level and school-wide) Provide information accessible to students and parents in Indigenous languages and utilize professional interpreting services (currently there are interpreting services in San Francisco for Maya languages including Yucatec Maya, Mam, Tzeltal, and Chol²⁰) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess linguistic strengths and allow opportunities to develop Indigenous language pathways (as a first, second, or additional language; as a heritage language; or as part of language revitalization efforts) Develop and integrate literacy units in the school curriculum that introduce all students to basic competencies in Maya language and culture Diversify school personnel to include multilingual Indigenous teachers and staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide regular opportunities for Indigenous parents and families to be consulted on expectations regarding the education of Indigenous children and youth Partner with local Indigenous community organizations to identify and support curricular and extracurricular learning opportunities Seek funds for school - community partnership projects and research for sustaining a college-going climate and plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify prior transnational educational experiences of students and their parents; consult and use materials in the Indigenous language (Mexican consulate, non-profit organizations, and government offices serving Indigenous students in the U.S. and in Mexico²¹) Foster collaborations (in person or remote) with teacher training programs and universities to develop instructional materials in the Indigenous language²² to support students and staff

²⁰ <http://www.asociacionmayab.org/Programa-de-Interpretes-Indigenas.html>

²¹ <https://dgeiib.basica.sep.gob.mx/es/acerca.php> and <https://www.inali.gob.mx/>

²² Locally in Yucatan, the Centro de Educación, Capacitación y Difusión Humanística de Yucatan continually offers Yucatec Maya courses online (<https://cecidhy.yucatan.gob.mx/>) and the Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya (<https://indemaya.yucatan.gob.mx/>)

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful for funding from the Latinx Research Center Faculty Mentored Undergraduate Research Fellowship program at the University of California, Berkeley. We thank Professor and Chair Laura E. Pérez, Dr. George Allen, Frida Torres, and Deborah Lustig at the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues for their support. The research project by Patricia Baquedano-López referenced in this research brief was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

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Marisela Zamora received a B.A. in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. Marisela's interests are in education, policy, social disparities, media, storytelling, and literary journalism.