

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 2 (2020)

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wt234w1>

Author

Martínez, Fátima Andrade

Publication Date

2020-10-01

Marginalized Students within California's Public-School System: experiences of Mexican Indígena youth

Fátima Andrade Martínez

Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

California's Indígena population (indigenous people who identify with origin communities in Mesoamerica) has grown over the last 70 years, especially during the 1990s. Simultaneously, the number of youth that have enrolled in the public-school system has increased. However, these youth are often not welcomed and instead experience racial microaggressions within schools that alienate and encourage them to assimilate while abandoning their culture. I will explore the history of displacement of Indígena youth and their interactions in schools. I will discuss a selection of Indígena youth experiences in the education system, while critically analyzing the implicit biases of those around them.

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Introduction

School legislators often do not take the necessary steps to create a safe and welcoming school culture where all students' backgrounds are properly recognized. This is especially the case for Mexican Indigenous youth that attend California schools, for whom resources and support services are not easily accessible, leading to an imbalance in educational opportunity, and social capital. Their experiences are often tucked away behind those of Chicano/Mestizx students. Further, the marginalization and discrimination that Indigenous youth experience at the hands of students and school administrators is vividly present in the telling of their everyday experiences, which can hinder their educational and personal development. While community-based initiatives have helped empower youth through self-advocacy, much more work is needed. This article surveys the complex issues involved and argues that it is important to hear the testimony of Mexican indigenous youth to be able to better serve their needs within the school system.

Through this essay, I want to honor the testimonies of the individuals who shared their experiences for us to hear and reflect upon. I recognize my privilege as a Mestiza and do not want to intrude or overstep into indigenous communities. Through this essay, my goal is to try to bring awareness and be an ally to indigenous peoples. I will extensively look at testimonios shared with researchers to drive my analysis of recurring themes of a broken system that does not benefit students. Through this essay, I will draw parallels between the different testimonios and my own observations on my experiences as a student at Oakland Senior High School.

Terminology

Before we begin, it is important that we define terms that will be used throughout this essay: Indigenous, Mestizx, Chicax, and Indígena. Mestizx communities are peoples that have a mixed heritage, often of Indigenous and European descent. Further, Chicax populations find their roots between Mexico and the United States and thus identify with cultures on both sides of the border. In contrast, Indigenous refers to people who are known to be the first inhabitants of an area. Hence, it is important to differentiate between indigenous groups and their distinctive identities. This is not always a straightforward task due to the dynamic and overlapping nature of communities in the same geographical area. Following Reyes Basurto et al. (2019: 1), the diasporic Mexican Indigenous community in California is referred to here as Indígena in order to avoid confusion with "[t]he broader term Indigenous, which could also include indigenous peoples with longer histories in California."

Even though these labels have been defined, it is important to note that labeling people is reductionist and imperfect, as identities are intersectional. Therefore, it is crucial to privilege how people choose to identify.

Background

In order to understand the way of Mexican Indígena communities, we first have to understand the history that has brought them to their current location. Indigenous culture and language are marginalized within a perceived homogenous culture of Spanish-speaking México, a country with strong anti-indigenous sentiments in its society. These sentiments are not only present today but can be traced back in history. "In the mid-nineteenth century the indigenous communities became the target of liberal reforms that sought to modernize them out of existence by incorporating their members into the young and modernizing Mexican nation-state" (Kearney 2000: 178). The underlying attempt by liberals to "modernize" Indigenous folk and have them join the homogenous Mexican culture while leaving their own culture behind resulted in an increase in the marginalization they experienced. These ideologies are best demonstrated with the word *Indio*, a derogatory word with connotations of being "dirty", "dumb", or "stupid" (Kearney 2000).

Further, lack of resources, deforestation, and soil erosion has been forcing members of indigenous communities to leave their home communities and migrate. It started in the 1940s with the Bracero Program, increasing steadily, and drastically in the 1990s, the United States became a common destination for Indigenous Mexican migrants. The increase in migration to the United States was reflected in the population jump of Mixteco farmworkers in the state of California to 5-7% of the total agricultural labor force (Rivera-Salgado 1999).

Welcoming and Unwelcoming attitudes

Mislabeling and its effect on Indígena identity

Indígena students that attend public schools in the United States are often misidentified by schools and labeled as Spanish heritage speakers because of assumptions based on their country of origin (Machado Casas 2012). However, Mexico is home to hundreds of diverse Indigenous languages, and many people from Mexico do not speak Spanish. In addition, schools simply label Indígena students as Latinx, a term that erases class and race, thus removing Indígena identity. Schools are where youth spend much of their

developmental years and where their identities are shaped as a result of social experiences and challenges. Therefore, it is vital for schools to acknowledge and properly identify students' cultural identities. Generalization of student identities showcases the schools' lack of proper understanding of the complex histories of their students.

Labeling students as Spanish heritage speakers causes problems for them because when they are placed in English Student Learner classrooms, their indigenous languages are not acknowledged. They are often addressed in Spanish, a language they may not speak, as described by a young Mixtec man,

"When they talked to me, I didn't respond because even though I understood a little Spanish I couldn't speak it. When I didn't respond they thought I was mute and that I didn't know anything. Eventually they realized I didn't speak Spanish when they asked me and I said, 'No, only Mixteco.' Then they asked, 'Mixteco, what is that?' I didn't know what to say" (Perez, Vasquez, Buriel 2016; 259).

The misconception and expectation that Indígena youth must speak Spanish places youth in situations in which they have to explain their culture to others. This is not a responsibility that should fall on them. By asking "what is that?", individuals look at indigenous languages as unworthy of being acknowledged or named. A prominent example of delegitimizing indigenous languages is by calling them dialectos. However, this young man's experience is not an isolated example, and it is a common theme in the testimony of Indígena youth.

Many students report strongly relating to blatant discriminatory practices experienced by others, even if they have not lived it themselves. For example, perhaps not all Indígena students have experienced being asked to explain their language and culture, but they identify with the sentiments of alienation and seclusion. The visceral connection to discriminatory experiences of other students, based on language usage and different cultural traditions, demonstrates how powerful and meaningful Indígena identity is for students (Barrillas-Chón 2010). Thus, the shared experiences of discrimination and marginalization may create a sense of strong Indígena identity, pride, and solidarity amongst students. Such cultural solidarity makes it crucial for schools to recognize students'

complex backgrounds.

Student attitudes toward physical spaces

The physical location of English Student Learner (ESL) classrooms impacts students as it reinforces the divisions found within the school campus more broadly. ESL classes are usually located on the outskirts of campuses, physically separating student populations. Hence, preventing exposure and interaction of Indígena students with others. Overall, perpetuating strong biases and stereotypes that hinder Indígena youth from being welcomed in common areas. In one case, the lack of Indígena student involvement with the rest of the student population was visible in the school's lunch cafeteria. There, English Student Learners would sit on the outside tables while English-speaking white students sat in the center. By sitting on the outside students were looked down upon by school administrators, who spent most of their time with English-speaking students (Gitlin, Buendía, Crosland, and Doumbia 2003). The lack of staff involvement with students reinforces present unwelcoming attitudes. Generally, the lack of integration into mainstream school culture negatively affects Indígena students because they do not gain the same social capital as others.

Ironically, Indígena students may at times see this physical separation as a welcoming practice by school administration as they are given what feels like a safe space. In this way, they believe the school provides them a place in which they can create a space for themselves (Perez, Vasquez, Buriel 2016). Students carry out this practice outside provided spaces, and locate teachers they can communicate and relate to, expanding their allies (Perez, Vasquez, Buriel 2016). Even though students perceive these efforts as welcoming, the underlying message of separation is prominent in schoolwide culture.

My own experiences during high school in Oakland, California, reflect similar patterns. During the summer of 2014, Oakland High School enrolled many English language learners and unaccompanied minors only after other schools intended for newcomers in the district were fully enrolled. Oakland High was not prepared with the proper curriculum or physical space to take in this population of students. Thus, the new students took it into their own hands to create safe spaces for themselves after the school did little to welcome them. One of these spaces was the corner towards the back of our senior court, used for activities to promote school spirit such as homecoming. As English-speakers, we sat near the front or middle of the court to better participate in activities. In contrast, English learners and Indígena students' presence was not acknowledged as they did not participate. They were effectively excluded

from events because of the language barrier in programming. Neither students nor administration took the time to bridge the accessibility gap to create a welcoming space for all students.

Further, the stark alienation of Indígena students was present within student-run clubs. During the 2014-15 school year, multiple groups of students would gather in a classroom during lunch to meet as part of Latinos Unidos. However, even though the group was meant to raise awareness and unity within the Latinx community, there was a sharp division between Mestizx and Indígena students. There was little to no communication between student groups even though they were present in the same room. The teacher adviser for the group tried multiple ways to bridge this divide, such as pairing students with each other, but they were not successful. Everyone kept to themselves, and in multiple occasions, you would hear the derogatory term dialecto in the room. Overall, within the testimonios of students and my experiences during my time at Oakland High, reoccurring themes of alienation and prejudices have come forth.

School's Support Programs

The lack of representation and resources targeted for Indígena students is a common issue within school campuses. The belief that schools are providing uniform resources and program funding for all students is prevalent among school administrators (Barillas-Chón 2010). However, this color-blind approach to student needs only exacerbates Indígena youth's disadvantages since it does not focus on their specific needs. The little attention paid to special needs leads to the underfunding of classroom resources that are needed for appropriate inclusivity. For example, many English Student Learner classes often contain more than 30 students that speak up to 12 different languages (Barillas-Chón 2010), as can be seen through Valentina's anecdote, a 6th grader in Linda Vista, California:

"Nos pusieron allí con otros estudiantes que no hablaban muy bien el inglés...tampoco. Eran vietnamitas, hmongs, laos y nos-, mexicanos y nosotras. Pues, nos ponen, era ESL y nos ponen todos juntos todos allí sin poder comunicarnos tratando de aprender inglés. El mexicano no podía comunicarse con el de hmong. El de hmong tampoco con nosotros... luego ya sabemos algunas palabras en inglés. Entonces ya fuimos aprendiendo (Kovats 2010; 36)."

There is so little institutional support for teachers in English student learner classrooms that students can detect it. Students are conscious of the disadvantages they face due to strained communication with peers and scarcity of school involvement to improve

classroom services.

Negative Stereotypes and Abuse

Indígena youth are mocked for their lack of access to Spanish since they are expected to be heritage speakers. They are belittled and treated as lacking comprehension by mestizxs as they do not meet mestizx's expectations of Spanish fluency (Barillas-Chón 2010). This was the case for Paulina, a young Mixtec adult who recalls her middle school experience, her testimony demonstrates constant bullying,

"Entonces, en la escuela nos hacían burlas porque no hablábamos bien el español. Me acuerdo que yo decía "la mapa" y decían 'no es la mapa es el mapa'. Entonces me pusieron de apodo "la mapa." Entonces en ese momento te avergüenzas de ser, no sé, por la culpa de ser mixteco, hablar mixteco, no aprendes bien el otro idioma. Entonces, como que te da pena y dices pues no, no somos mixtecos. (Kovats 2010; 50)."

The mocking that Paulina suffered because of a grammatical mistake perpetuates insecurity for all students in that learning environment as many fear possible harassment. Instead of being mocked, students should receive affirmations for their multi-language skills.

Further, shock has been a common sentiment in Indígena youth's testimonies regarding facing more discrimination based on language and physical appearance at the hands of Mestizxs than their "American" counterparts. Paulina recalls this sentiment when she shares her experience with marginalization in middle school, as she states,

"I would say like the American kids were more understandable. 'Cause maybe they assume we're all Mexicans, they didn't really care what part of Mexico you were from or if your skin was darker. It was just within the Mexican culture that they do treat you bad because of your darker skin or because of your features, indigenous features. I mean it was just between Mexicans, so that's what...I don't know, that was the hardest part to understand, like hey, we're from the same country (Kovats 2010; 50)."

Even though she acknowledges the existing biases held by English-speaking white students, she makes it clear that the abuse by Mestizx students was worse. The abuse from her peers leaves Paulina feeling betrayed, and thus, she states, "that was the hardest part to understand, like hey, we're from the same country (Kovats 2010; 50)". This is just one demonstration of the long history of discrimination and the disconnect between Mestizxs and Indígena

students.

Consequently, negative stereotypes around their physical characteristics and language access prevent Indígena youth from fully integrating and being welcomed into school culture. Mocking can cause Indígena youth to feel ashamed of speaking indigenous languages in front of their peers. As stated by a high schooler,

"Sometimes I feel embarrassed talking in front of the class in my own language with my friends because they start calling us names and curse at us. When they do that, I'd rather just not talk or tell them I'm from another place (Perez, Vasquez, Buriel 2016, 259)."

The sentiments and acts of alienation caused by negative comments increase the desire of Indígena students to be part of the general environment. Hence, some Indígena youth decide to only speak Spanish or English to not be as ostracized (Lee 2007). This can cause a change in Indígena students' identity, creating a separation between their private home life and their school experience, as well as weakening their connection to their roots and traditions.

Identity and Language

Hiding of Community of Origin

The shame that Indígena students feel around their language can be so great that it can lead students to hide their identity. It is commonly reported by Indígena students that they avoid expressing where they are from to others. Instead of specifying, many overgeneralize and state that they are from Mexico. In this way, they avoid further discrimination by being labeled indigenous. As shown with two elementary school sisters that only speak English to each other in public and when privately asked about why they did not speak Mixteco in the classroom, they responded, "No, it's a secret" (Kovats 2010, 43). These young girls are aware of the biases they face. At a young age, Indígena identity starts to develop as a secret and becoming more prevalent as youth grow older.

The secrecy and protection of Indígena identity from Mes-tizx students are reflected in the testimony of Paulina and Julieta, Mixteco young women. Both describe only stating that they were from Mexico and not from Oaxaca, in order to avoid discrimination. As Julieta states,

"No, siempre decía que era nomás de Mexico. I wouldn't say I was from Oaxaca. Maybe because I don't know, people would

say okay si es de Oaxaca es una india y no sé qué tanto. (Kovats 2010, 50)."

The fear of being singled out and the strong stereotypes and biases against Indígena populations make youth feel like they have to hide their indigenous heritage. Their lack of cultural expression prevents youth from being able to explore the different intersections that comprise their identity.

The lack of open identification with their communities of origin is directly connected to the unwelcoming practices that schools partake in. For example, the lack of safe spaces for youth leads them to hide their Indígena identity. Not only do students suffer a disadvantage because of the physical separation, but the lack of affirmations of their Indígena identity further creates a barrier. It leads to even greater difficulty in acquiring English. Different research has proven that through support and encouragement of home languages in the classroom, acquisition of English increases (Llanes 1981). Therefore, acknowledging home languages and giving students space to explore their identities in the classroom would increase learning success.

Language Brokering

Not all experiences are negative, and some are rather beneficial and give pride to Indígena youth, such as serving as language brokers for their family and community. Indígena children play the role of translating between their respective Indigenous language, Spanish, and English for their family and other people. Their language abilities are demonstrated in the testimony of a Zapotec woman as she recalls her experience,

"I've translated a lot for my mom, like the forms she gets, mail, my dad's insurance forms ... when I translate for them it's usually from English to Zapoteco. For my cousin who arrived from Oaxaca, I took her to get enrolled in high school and I just explained the whole process in Zapoteco. ... At my little brother's open house and back to school nights the teachers present in either Spanish or English and I just tell my mom what they said in Zapoteco" (Perez, Vasquez and Buriel 2016, 262).

Indígena youth recognize the importance of their translation work and take great pride in their contribution. The dexterity of the language brokering youth are partaking in needs to be recognized as a highly specialized skill and celebrated within schools as an asset

to the educational context.

Language Justice Programs and Initiatives

Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project

As a response to the lack of indigenous language interpretation services in medical contexts in Ventura County, community members, along with nurse and activist Sandy Young, founded the Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) in 2001. MICOP has evolved to become a key community activist organization for Ventura County's Indígena community. They hold and coordinate different initiatives and programs to facilitate the distribution of resources. For example, the program Puentes connects community members to public resources, the initiative Plaza Comunitaria helps adults finish their primary education, the Tequio youth program empowers school youth to reclaim their roots in a fight for educational justice, and Radio Indígena shares resources and provides programming in Indigenous languages (Campbell and Reyes Basurto In press). These are only a few of the many programs that MICOP coordinates to help the Indígena community on California's central coast.

"No me llames Oaxaquita" Campaign

Through MICOP's Tequio youth group, youth have worked on campaigns to create a more welcoming space for themselves in school through the campaign "No me llames Oaxaquita" (Don't call me little Oaxacan). This campaign launched in May 2012, demanding that the offensive words "Oaxaquita," "Indito," and "Indio" not be allowed to be used within schools (López 2016). After months of campaigning, they had their demands met through the Oxnard School District. This was a strong step forward for creating welcoming spaces within schools. The campaign provided a physical and emotional space where the voices and needs of Indígena youth were heard, something that is not common within the education system.

This campaign brought to light many testimonies regarding extensive discrimination faced by students, parents, and community leaders. The testimonies shared throughout the campaign created solidarity among Indígena folks. This campaign was reported on by various news agencies nationally. With their testimonies, they have begun to break down the homogenous image Mexico tries to portray. Youth are campaigning for better language representation and are demanding to be treated with the same rights as their

non-Indígena peers.

Language Maintenance

Since 2015, MICOP has been partnering with linguists at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to start efforts for indigenous language maintenance and documentation. In 2015-16, Professor Eric W. Campbell and community member Griselda Reyes Basurto offered a graduate Linguistic Field Methods class that touched on phonological transcription and analysis, the development of a practical writing system, and the development of practical resources for the community, among many other topics (Campbell and Reyes Basurto In press). Through this class and further efforts, Campbell and Basurto contributed to the launch of classes intended to teach community members a practical writing system. The efforts to document, revitalize, and provide resources for the community bring hope that youth will grow up with more resources to be able to fight the discrimination that they face and to continue to share their culture with future generations.

Conclusion

The lack of resources aimed toward Indígena students in schools leads to a negative school culture that is uninformed about the historical and present-day discrimination Indígena youth face. This lack of information fosters negative stereotypes and ideologies, affecting the way that Indígena youth are perceived by their peers. Thus, leading to cycles of harassment, primarily by Mestizx students, based on Indígena students' language and physical characteristics. The constant discrimination that Indígena youth face can lead them to have harmful views about their own identity, reflecting on youths' decision to speak English or Spanish instead of their indigenous languages. To help prevent bigoted practices and language loss, schools need to implement programs that value all identities of students. Therefore, the questions arise of what possible resources can be implemented within schools to better serve the needs of students. In order to find guidance, it is important for schools to turn to organizations such as MICOP to follow their leadership in fostering safe spaces for Indígena youth. Overall, it is important to validate and encourage all youth to explore their intersecting identities in the safety of their school.

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About the Author

Fátima was born in Michoacán, México and migrated to Oakland, California in November of 2004. She grew up in the inner-city as the oldest daughter and became her family's translator soon after settling. However, she quickly realized the condescending looks her family members would receive as she translated for them, so she became an avid motivator for her family to attend English classes. Further, growing up in underfunded schools she noticed the lack of resources for students but specifically for parents, as they struggled to communicate with predominantly English-Speaking teachers. These inequalities have been a driving factor as she pursued her bachelor's degree in Latin American & Iberian Studies. She hopes to someday give back to her community by helping bridge the gap of language access. She has been able to explore some of these injustices within the Indígena community through the strong and unconditional mentorship of Dr. Eric W. Campbell. Dr. Campbell has been an influential force as she considers future educational routes.