Indigeneity and Pathways through Higher Education in Mexico

To analyze the impact of institutional diversity on the experiences, abilities, and identity of indigenous students, in their different social dimensions

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

National Autonomous University of Mexico

Veracruzana University

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Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

University of Bath – National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) – Veracruzana University (UV)

Starting points

Mexican education policy: substantial diversification, 12 types of public institution (including Intercultural)

Assimilation / Integration versus Separation / recognition : Underpinning the issue of Indigeneity and educational inequality is a tension between the **individual** and the **collective**.

What *impacts* do these different types of educational institution have on Indigenous peoples' and communities, across 3 domains:

   Family and peer groups

   Forms of work and labour market engagement

   Community / regional level

How do the trajectories of Indigenous peoples' differ according to the university type they attend? (their horizons, values, labour market preferences, family/community links etc.)

How do different university types disrupt / maintain individual and community trajectories?

METHODOLOGY

- Collaborative ethnography

PHASES:

1. In-depth interviews with higher education indigenous students and graduates, as well as with professors.

2. Focus groups with students, professors and institutional heads.

3. Workshops and forums to foster inter-knowledge dialogue with indigenous organizations, students and alumni associations.

TOTAL 362 interviews
181 – students
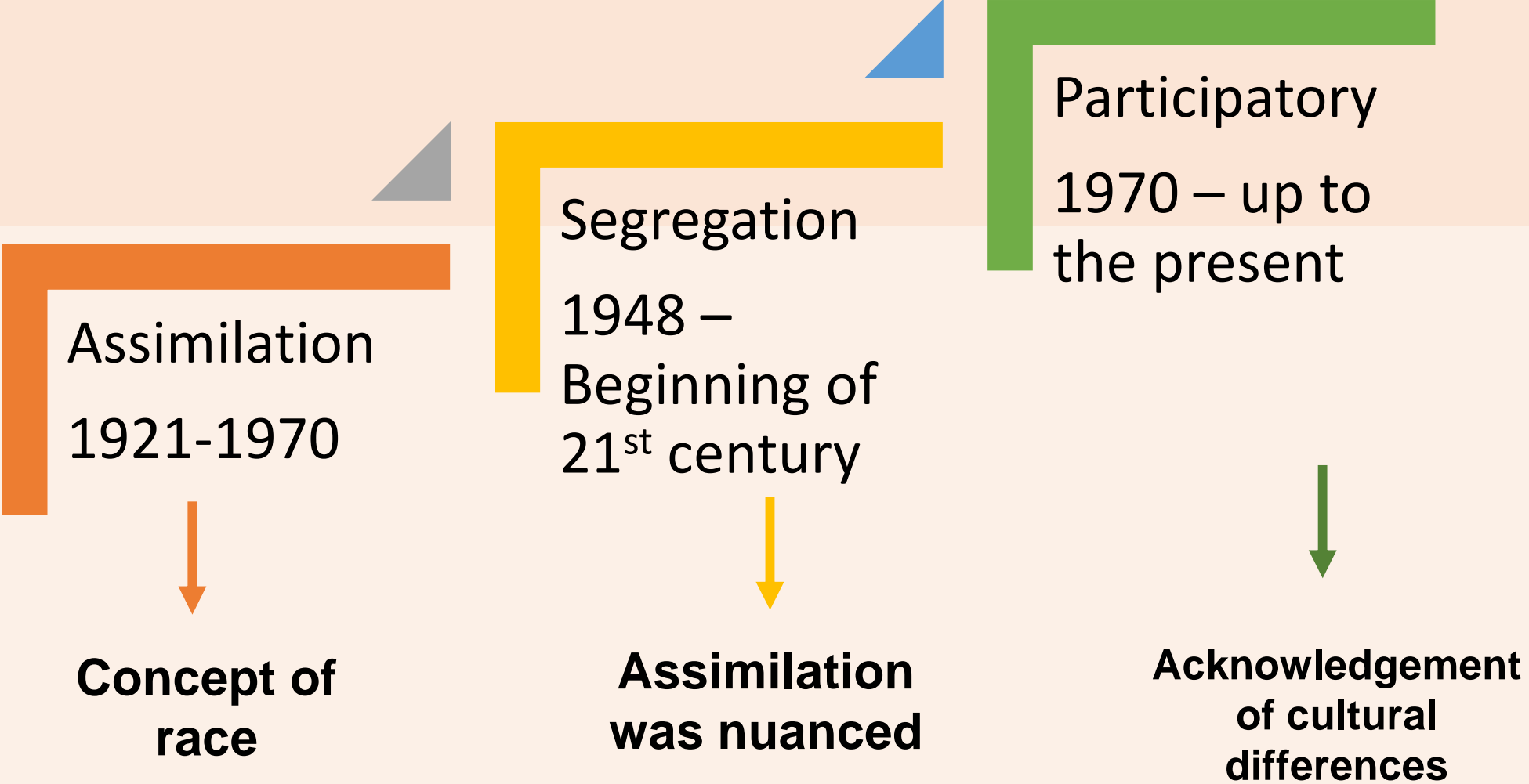**99 – graduates**
82 – teachers or ss' supervisors

6 states/provinces of the country: Ciudad de México, Estado de México, Puebla, Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas

19 HEIs of seven different types:

1. **Federal Public Universities**: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

2. **State/Provincial Public Universities**: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), Universidad Veracruzana (UV) y Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO).

3. **Public Institutes of Technology**: Instituto Tecnológico Superior de Zongolica (ITSZ), Instituto Tecnológico de Comitán (ITC).

4. **Public and Private Intercultural Universities**: Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH), Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI) (Selvas, Grandes Montañas y Totonacapan), Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla (UIEP), Instituto Superior Intercultural Ayuuk (ISIA), Instituto de Educación Superior para el Desarrollo Humano Sustentable - Moxviquil y Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER).

5. **Agricultural University**: Universidad Autónoma Chapingo (UACh).

6. **Private Universities**: Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP) y Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA) campus Santa Fe y Puebla.

7. **Teachers Training Schools**: Escuela Normal Bilingüe e Intercultural de Oaxaca (ENBIO).

Education for indigenous peoples in Mexico

Assimilation

1921-1970

Segregation

1948 –
Beginning of
21st century

Participatory

1970 – up to
the present

**Concept of
race**

**Assimilation
was nuanced**

**Acknowledgement
of cultural
differences**

| **1990s and early 2000s** $\longrightarrow$ | **Educational policies to counter exclusion of indigenous population in HE** |

1. Distribution of "ethnically" labeled grants.

National scope	**Institutional scope**
a) **Elisa Acuña Grants. (Formerly National Program of Maintenance for HE)** b) **Program of Support for Indigenous Students in Higher Education Institutions (PAEIIES) – Funded by Ford Foundation and ANUIES** c) **International Fellowship Program – Funded by Ford Foundation and Center for Research and Higher Education (CIESAS)**	a) **System of Grant for Indigenous and Afro-descendant Students (SBEI) - UNAM** b) **"A Bet on the Future" (UPAEP – private university)** c) **"If You Want, You Can" (UIA – private university)**

2. Admission quotas

- Some places are allocated for indigenous students, as well as special admission procedures, i.e., University of Nayarit and University of Guadalajara

3. Pedagogical and didactic supports

Developed to reinforce permanence of indigenous students in parallel with grant programs, since grade-point average is an important requirement.

- Pathways to Higher Education (PHE), sponsored by the Ford Foundation and ANUIES. It includes academic support, tutoring, management and training activities.
- University Program for Cultural Diversity and Interculturality (PUIC) - UNAM,
- Program for Interculturality and Indigenous Affairs (PIAI) - UIA

4. Creation of intercultural programs or campuses in public universities

It includes curricular transversality, creation of bachelor's degree based on this perspective, opening programs for monitoring indigenous students, and fostering research on indigenous peoples.

- University Netwok and Support Unit for Indigenous Communities (UACI) – University of Guadalajara.

5. Opening of HE institutions for indigenous peoples

Unlike affirmative actions, this policy sought to create institutions for training of indigenous professionals, based on intercultural and diversity approaches

- Teacher training schools were opened in Cherán, Michoacán (1998) and later in Zinacatán, Chiapas; Tlacolula, Oaxaca; and Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosí.
- 2003. Intercultural universities were opened.

TABLE 2. SCHOOLING POPULATION AND SCHOOLING IN INDIGENOUS POPULATION, AGED 3 AND OVER, 2020

	Population (total) 119,976,584	Indigenous population 7,364,645
No schooling	6.4%	17.6%
Kinder garten	5.1%	4%
Primary education	27.7%	41.7%
Lower secondary	24.5%	21.7%
Upper secondary	18.7%	10.1%
Higher education	16.9%	4.6%

Source: Own elaboration based on ANUIES statistics

TABLE 3. TOTAL HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPEAKERS ENROLLMENT 2016 - 2024

	Total enrollment	ILS enrollment	Percentage of ILS students in relation to total enrollment
2016-2017	4,430,248	46,422	1.04%
2017-2018	4,561,792	49,471	1.08%
2018-2019	4,705,400	50,973	1.08%
2019-2020	4,931,200	53,431	1.08%
2020-2021	4,983,204	61,182	1.22%
2021-2022	5,068,493	62,000	1.22%
2022-2023	5,192,618	65,231	1.25%
2023-2024	5,393,078	64,854	1.20%

Source: Own elaboration based on ANUIES statistics for the corresponding years

TABLE 4. ENROLLMENT OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPEAKERS, UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL, PER TYPE OF INSTITUTIONS

	Federal Public Univ.	State Public Univ.	Public Univ. of Solidarity financing	Intercul-tural Univ.	Public Normal Schools	Techno-logical Univ.
2016-2017	3,081	11,531	1,299	5,082	1,977	5,275
2017-2018	2,505	10,832	2,341	4,687	2,298	5,145
2018-2019	2,949	12,944	2,722	4,026	1,870	6,021
2019-2020	3,345	12,269	3,716	5,002	2,231	6,746
2020-2021	6,696	13,954	3,883	5,076	2,456	5,604
2021-2022	6,474	15,986	2,559	5,636	3,373	5,253
2022-2023	10,561	13,540	3,096	6,044	3,433	5,464
2023-2024	10,438	13,273	4,558	6,084	3,760	5,482

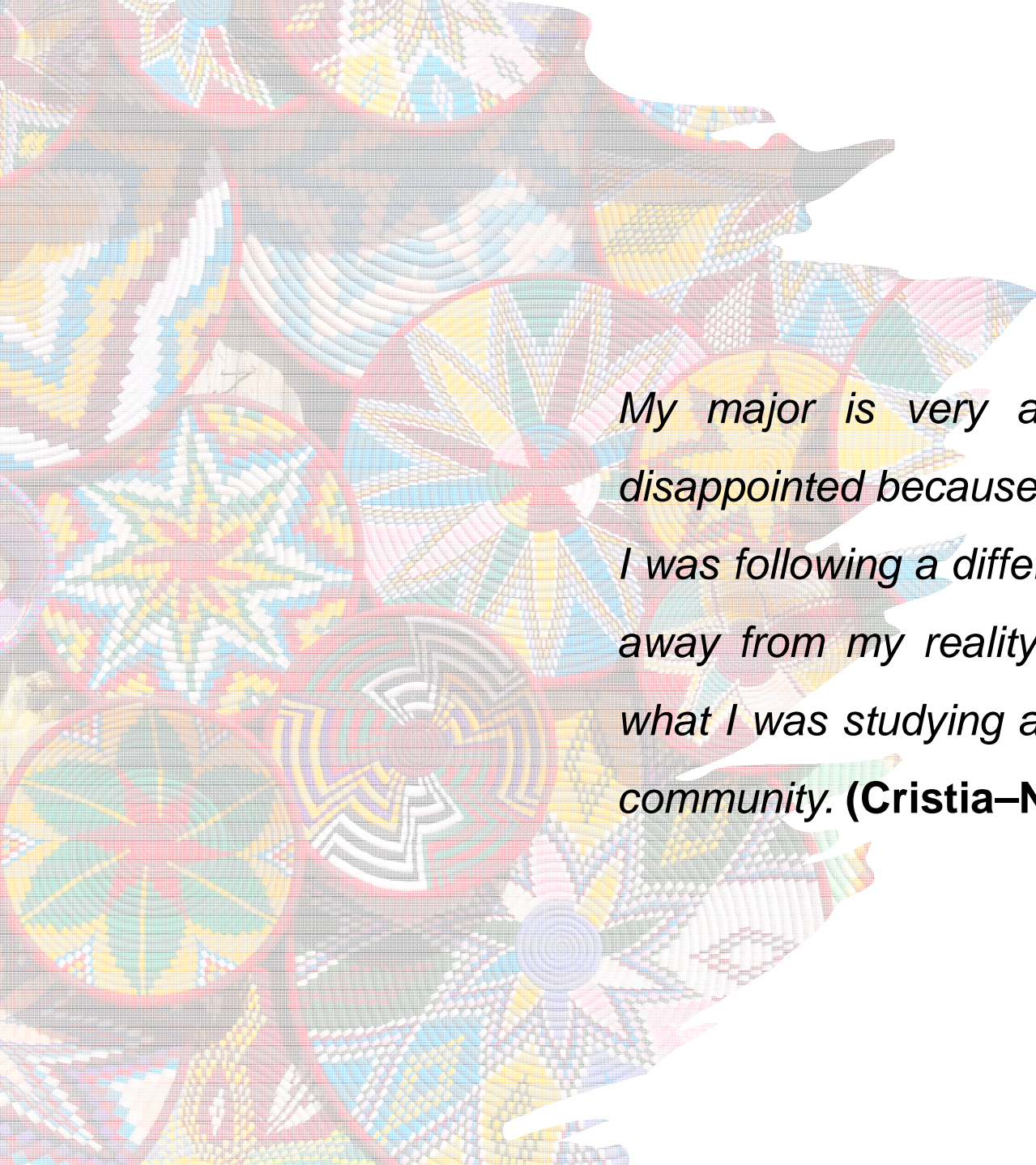Source: Own elaboration based on ANUIES statistics for the corresponding years

Epistemic coloniality

Despite the increase in higher education enrollment, exclusionary conditions are reproduced by institutions that deepen the disadvantages of indigenous students

- Lack of acknowledgment of the indigenous peoples' worldviews.
- Unrecognition of traditional knowledge and practices.

For most of indigenous students, syllabus contents and by extension the bibliography, authors and pedagogical activities are alien to their needs and the reality of their communities.

My major is very academic, very scientific. Sometimes, I was disappointed because I didn't find what I wanted, but rather, I felt that I was following a different path that was taking me further and further away from my reality. That was the problem, that I couldn't relate what I was studying and apply it to what I was living at home, in my community. **(Cristia–Nahua – Federal Public Univ.–Biología**)

When I took the course of European or avant-garde currents, I had the opportunity to read translations in Spanish or in other languages, but we never read works written in indigenous languages. So, I began to think that indigenous languages are also languages that we speak in Latin America, but they are not taken into account. (**Érika–Tzeltal– Private University– Literatura Latinoamericana**)

Based on the epistemic coloniality, it is decided what can or should be considered "knowledge". In Mexico, as it happens in Latin America, indigenous peoples' worldviews have historically been banished by the hegemony of Western scientific and philosophical thought. Knowledge and practices of indigenous communities are considered primitive, lacking accuracy and objectivity
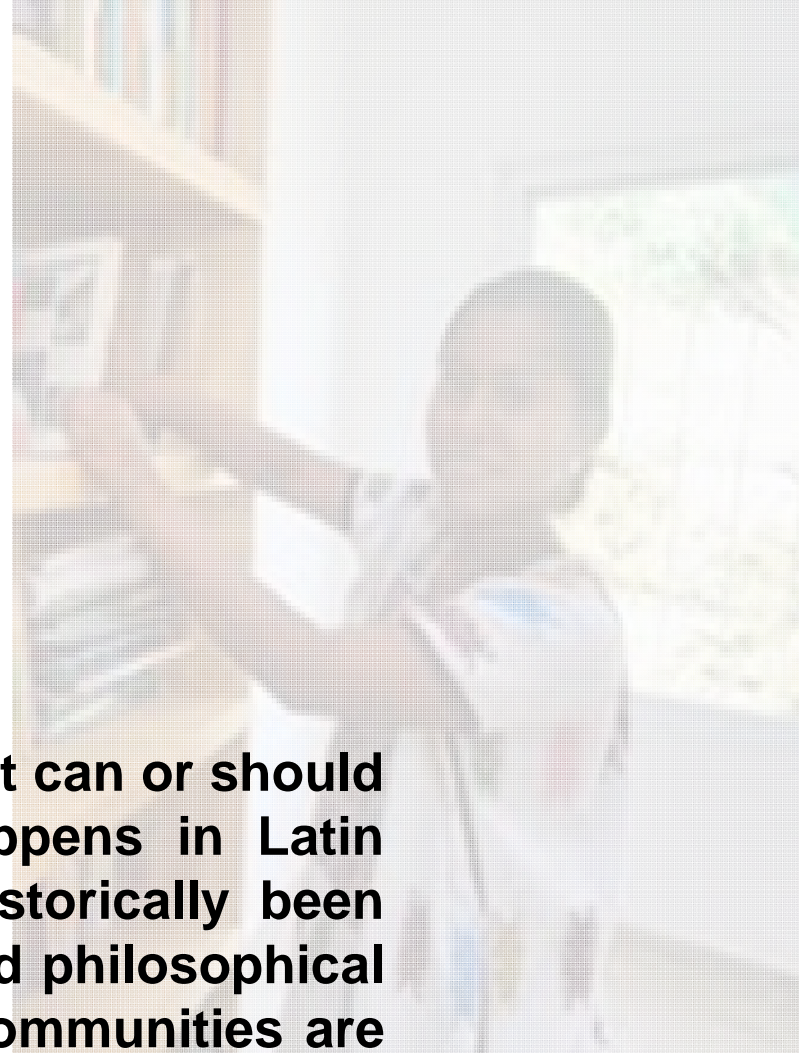
Indigenous youngsters who study in intercultural institutions have different experiences. According to them, there is a relation between the courses and their communities needs; also, students highlight teachers and institutional commitment in developing activities related to their knowledge, languages and cultures.

We have our own normative systems, there are some authorities don't comply with our law, because they say that indigenous communities have different regulations. But now that I am studying Law with a Plural Legal Approach, I realized that our law is valid, that we have rights.
(Andrea–Totonaco–Intercultural Univ.–Derecho con Enfoque de Pluralismo Jurídico)

Academic achievement and barriers

Indigenous students are also excluded from educational opportunities, even though they are formally registered HEI, because they don't have the academic competences to learn with the same conditions as their peers.

Most of them have shortages in some contents and in learning skills as a result of multiple exclusions accumulated throughout their previous training.

Yes, I had many shortages, or I still have them because many things are difficult for me to understand, I think, in some way, language also hampers my education, because we, indigenous people, aren't used to speak Spanish, and there are many things that we don't really understand. **(Marcela–Amuzgo–Agricultural Univ.–Ing Agrónoma)**

Writing has been difficult for me at times, as well as understanding readings, because they use a technical language, with more "specific" characteristics so to speak. This has been a big problem for me throughout my major. I do understand the readings, but sometimes I don't know how to explain myself in an academic or technical way. **(Linda–Zapoteco– Federal Public Univ.– Pedagogía)**

It was very hard for me, especially because education for indigenous communities is rather deficient. When I arrived at the university, I had many lacks, so, at first it was very complicated to read a paper of 30 pages, for example, I had to read it 5 or 6 times; also, to write an essay, to make a presentation using the technological tools. **(Oscar–Nahua– Private Univ.–Pedagogía)**

I think the course is very theoretical and we must read a lot, and, sometimes, readings have a vocabulary that is difficult to understand. I think that some authors are somewhat "extravagant" when writing or explaining their ideas, because sometimes I read and I ask myself, what does it say? and I need to read the paper again to be able to understand it in my words. **(Liliana–Totonaco–Intercultural Univ.–Derecho con Enfoque de Pluralismo Jurídico)**

Conditions of Educational system

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Low achievement

- Lack of schools and precarious conditions
- Unsteadiness of the teaching staff
- Lack of teachers who speak indigenous language
- Unavailability of educational materials in indigenous language.

These problems increase disadvantages for indigenous students, because they don't always have the knowledge and skills to contend for a place in higher education institutions, and when they do, they invest a greater amount of time and effort than non-indigenous youngsters.

Academic difficulties become a source of additional pressure for indigenous students, since most of them depend on institutional grants to continue studying, but they must have a high-grade point average.

I didn't like my university at the beginning, but for me it was important that they were going to give me a grant, so I decided to stay. Once, I thought about going to UNAM, but I pondered if I was going to able to work and study at the same time, because, when I was in high school, I had to get a job. My university is heaven compared others; I can't figure out how other students survive in the city with so many expenses. **(Thalía–Mixe–Agricultural Univ.–Ing. en Irrigación)**
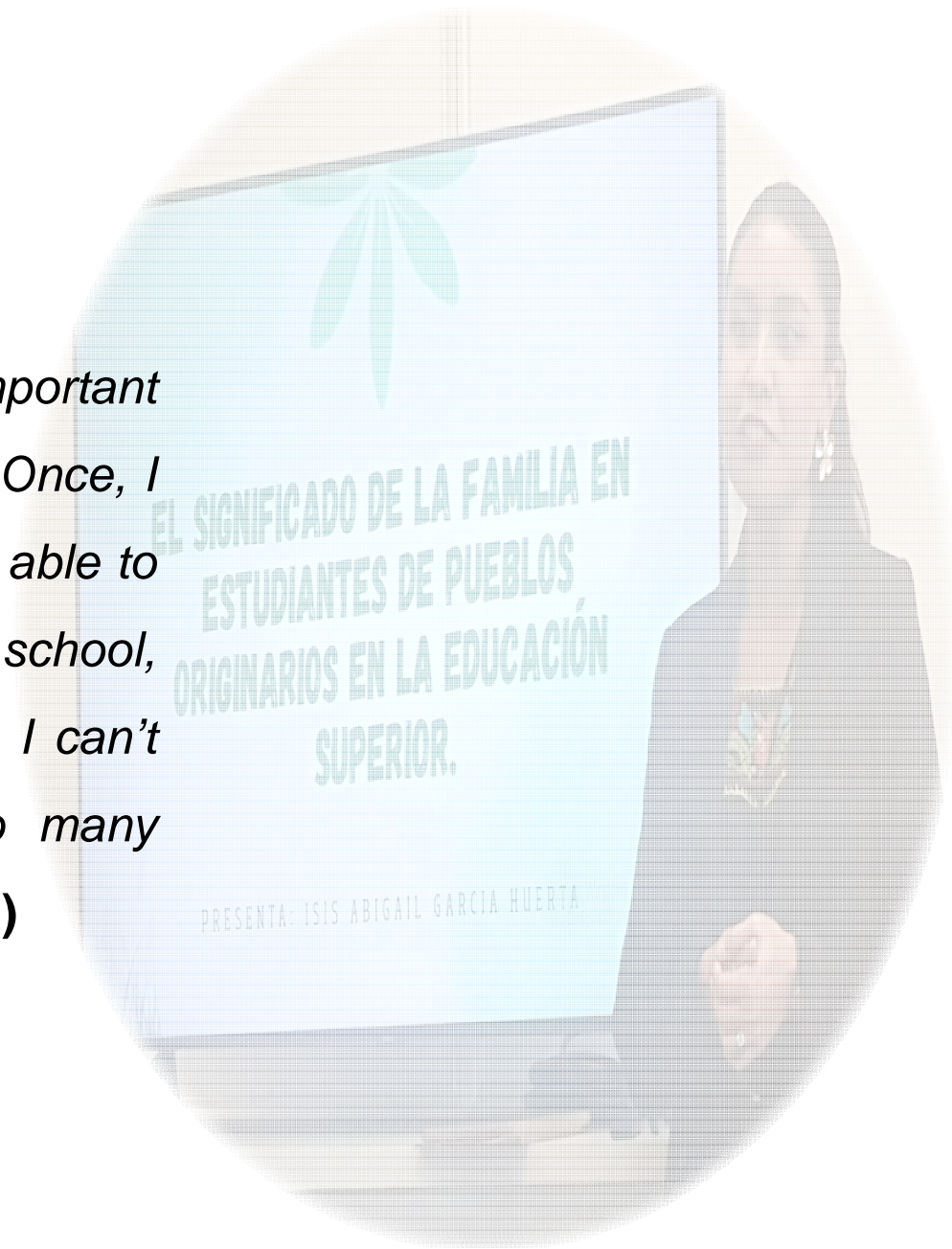
The cell phone I am using now was donated to me by the university trust, because when the teachers asked us to send our work by WhatsApp, email or by WhatsApp groups, I didn't have a device. In fact, I got into university thanks to the Grant "If you want, you can". **(Ramiro–Nahua–Private Univ.–Psicología)**

I told my mother that I wanted to study at the university, but she told me that it wasn't possible, because there was no money, so I got a job, saved some money and. All this pushed me even more to continue studying and when I got the grant, I was able to enter. **(Eduardo–Zoque popoluca–Intercultural Univ.–Gestión Intercultural para el Desarrollo)**

Microaggression / Discrimination

- Discrimination (either open or aversive)

- Invisibilization

- Institutional folklorization

Triggers of discrimination:

- Complexion / physical appearance

- Place of origin

- Language

- Social class

- Outfit of origin

Being indigenous is beautiful and I embrace it, but it can also hurt, because it seems that because you are from an indigenous group you need to legitimize yourself everywhere. Firstly, because people think that we are not capable; secondly, because they often think that you didn't earn your place at the university. This is because ethnic quotas have become very "popular", but, in the end, they have become a problem. **(Thalía– Ayuuk/Mixe–Agricultural Univ–Ing. Irrigación)**

I think I could never get along with my classmates, because they always made comments, such as: "why are you wearing those shoes?" because, since I was a child, I got used to wearing huaraches. And, for me, it had never been a problem, however, it seemed that what made me proud in my town was disapproved at the university. (**Andrea–Mixe Federal Public Univ.–Pedagogía**)

You feel the change, because life in the community is very different from urban life and you have the feeling that you "don't fit in", for example, because of the way you dress, the color of your skin, the way you speak. **(Oscar–Nahua–Private Univ.–Pedagogía)**

At first, it was like "a clash of different cultures", because many of us came from indigenous communities. There were Nahuas, Popolucas, and, also, people who came from the city. Our classmates from the city teased us because of the way we spoke, they called us nicknames for speaking an indigenous language. **(Eduardo–Zoque popoluca–Intercultural Univ.–Derecho)**
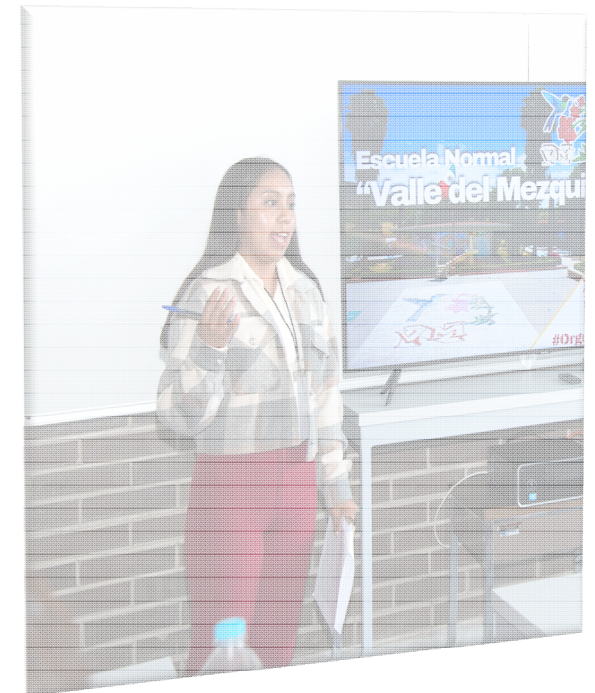
Discrimination poses a dilemma for indigenous students: some of them feel forced to change in order to be accepted, while others see it as an opportunity to reinforce their identity.

Research agrees that discrimination triggers a process of identity reconfiguration, some students try to hide their origin, dress like others, don't speak their language, and adapt themselves to the institutional environment and to the culture of the city. However, some others take the way back, it means, they take on the role of ethical-political subjects, and struggle for the recognition of their rights and cultures.
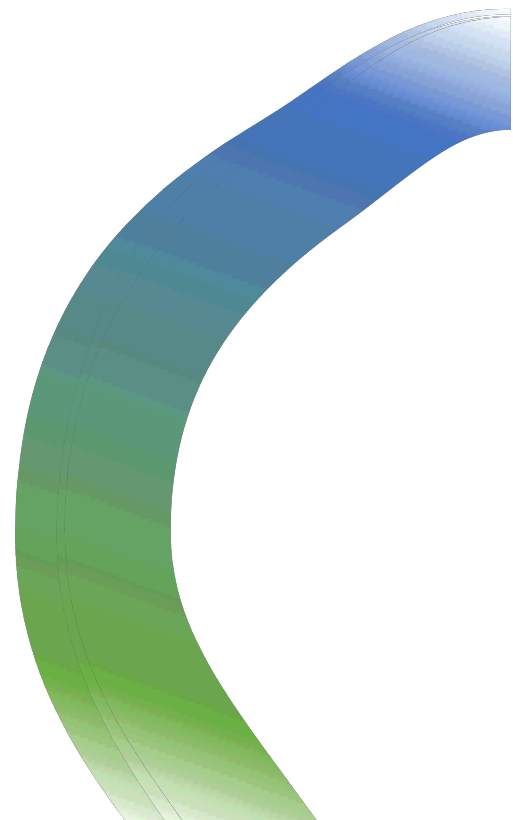
This process depends mainly on the type of institution and its culture, as well as the commitment of educational agents to it (teachers, students, administrative staff)

Indigenous students sometimes are invisible to institutions.
They are not treated in the same way as their peers.

It's very common, even in university offices they ask: "Who are foreigners?" It's like a "label". When I arrived here, I didn't know what it means to be a foreigner and it is very odd, because we often complain about how Mexicans are treated in other countries, but people from the city do the same thing. (**Javier– Tzeltal – Federal Public Univ. – Ing. Geológica**)

I may have been "displaced", but not discriminated against, because academic activities at ISIA focus mainly on the Ayuuk culture, but I don't feel part of it, because I am Zapoteca, however my language and culture are not promoted by the university as much as the Ayuuk culture. **(Ángela – Zapoteca – Intercultural Univ. – Admon. y Desarrollo Sustentable)**

Folklorization. A practice that resembles racists patronizing behavior. In the case of indigenous communities, it also implies alienation and marketing of their knowledge, practices, and culture, whether for economic purposes, for achieving legitimacy, or for gaining political advantage.

For example, once, the University Gazzette published a note that said: "Indigenous person finished his major and is developing a research..." When these words or expressions are used to refer to us, to indigenous people, it seems very folkloric to me. The institution highlights folklore, instead of committing itself to discussion about interculturality. (**Candelaria–Nahua–Federal Public Univ.– Comunicación**)

I had never thought about the existence such concept, until I entered the university. But before that I didn't know I was indigenous, when I introduce myself, I usually say: "I am Mixe, and I am from Oaxaca," I'd never thought about the meaning of "indigenous", I think it is a very institutional category. (**Andrea– Mixe –Federal Public Univ.– Pedagogía**)

The cultural fair shouldn´t be a display of traditional costumes, people are more than that, they have a history, culture, and a language. Traditional costumes are the surface of something deeper. In addition, the university should train teachers and encourage them to be more empathetic with students. For example, here, the student services department doesn't include all indigenous students. (**Focus group– Agricultural Univ.**)

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Thank you