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Indigenous Education in Mexico: Indigenous Students' Voices

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The purpose of this article is to investigate whether, despite a shift in political and educational discourses over the last decades that suggests that Indigenous cultures and languages are recognized, any real change has occurred in terms of Indigenous education in Mexico. It is possible that official bilingual intercultural education is still just a goal. Data presented include four Indigenous students' accounts of their educational experiences in monolingual and bilingual schools. The findings suggest that Indigenous education still has assimilationist tendencies, as far as the mestizo identity and the use of Spanish are concerned, and these tendencies are based on a (neo)liberal vision of multiculturalism that promotes *ethnophagy*. There is room for more changes to occur.

Indigenous education has long been an important topic of discussion all over Latin America. In Mexico, after independence from Spain in 1821, attempts were made to integrate Indigenous peoples into the new ideal of a nation state. In Latin America, in general, and in Mexico, in particular, schools played a fundamental role in assimilating and acculturating Indigenous peoples in the homogenic mold of a unique identity and a unique language represented by the newly independent nation state (González, 2009; López, 2001).

In Mexico, the official number of Indigenous peoples varies from one source to another. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (i.e., National Institute for Statistics and Geography) reported that 6.5% of the Mexican population in 2010 are Indigenous peoples (who spoke an Indigenous language), whereas the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI; i.e., National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples) published a national average of 10.5% for 2009 based on self-identification. Today, Indigenous peoples represent 68 linguistic groups (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas [National Institute of Indigenous Languages], 2008), and the amendment in 1992 to the Mexican Constitution declared the country as being officially multicultural and plurilingual.

Although constitutional recognition seems promising, Indigenous peoples have consistently had the highest poverty rates in the country (Bello, 2008; Hall & Patrinos, 2005). According to the 2000 National Census on People and Households, illiteracy among non-Indigenous peoples was 7.54%, whereas among Indigenous peoples, it was 33.7%. Only 8.31% of non-Indigenous Mexicans did not get any official education, whereas 31.35% of Indigenous peoples were

deprived of it; 11.58% of *mestizos*¹ (i.e., mixed heritage between Spanish and Indigenous populations) have a university diploma, whereas only 2.6% of Indigenous peoples had the opportunity to go to universities. This discrepancy is the result of Indigenous educational policy and practice since Mexican independence.

This article reports on empirical research conducted for an ongoing critical ethnographic case study at a Mexican university where Indigenous students are enrolled in a special program for minority students. The program offers full scholarships to 56 students aged 18 and 22, who come from poor rural communities in Mexico, who want to continue their studies at the university, and who are linked to a social organization that contributes to their community's wellbeing.

The educational experiences described by the four bilingual Indigenous student participants who are enrolled in the scholarship program suggest that their primary education, in both monolingual and bilingual schools, were based on monolingual and monocultural ideologies (i.e., linguistic and cultural ideologies that valorize one unique language and one unique culture), as explained in the contextual part of this article. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate that, despite official changes regarding the recognition of Indigenous cultures and languages, Indigenous education in Mexico is still assimilationist. The latest attempts to introduce (bilingual) intercultural education may even produce stronger assimilationist effects than the former monolingual system by using Indigenous languages to reach the state's objectives of acculturating Indigenous cultures to the national culture. The question raised in this article is whether (bilingual) intercultural programs are based on a vision of multiculturalism that questions unequal relations of power and empower Indigenous students, or whether they do not question them and assimilate Indigenous peoples to the dominant culture in a more subtle way than through direct confrontation.

The study is mainly informed by post structuralism and critical applied linguistics, which frame power not only as one aspect of society, but as the basis of society itself (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), especially in former colonial countries like Mexico. For the purpose of this article, I, therefore, define (bilingual) intercultural education from a critical perspective (i.e., instruction provided in a student's first language, which focuses on historic, dynamic, and relational dimensions). This perspective of (bilingual) intercultural education defines and questions asymmetrical power relations between Mexico's dominant culture and language and its Indigenous cultures and languages. The purpose of (bilingual) intercultural education from this perspective is to empower Indigenous peoples and allow them to identify and subvert asymmetric power relations (Gasché, 1997; González, 2009, p. 6).

This research builds on the knowledge base that other scholars have developed in Indigenous education, mostly in Latin America. Although some of the literature focuses on top-down, or governmental pedagogical initiatives, and other work has focussed on bottom-up initiatives, no literature has focused on comparing the results of Indigenous education in both monolingual and bilingual education systems. For instance, not all Indigenous students go to bilingual intercultural schools. To fill this gap in the literature, the research presented in this article reports on Indigenous students' educational experiences and how both systems influence their cultural and linguistic identities.

This article is organized as follows: The first part focuses on a literature review that mainly deals with contemporary problems of (bilingual) intercultural education in Mexico, the second

¹See the second part of this article for a more in-depth discussion about the *mestizo* identity.

part contextualizes (bilingual) intercultural education to understand its political underpinnings, the theoretical framework is described in the third part, and the fourth part introduces the study. The final sections include a discussion in light of research results and tentative conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education and Indigenous people are intertwined discourses that gave birth to many different educational initiatives (Tinajero & Englander, 2011). Much has been written on Mexico's new educational initiatives, especially regarding its official (bilingual) intercultural programs (Aguilar Nery, 2004; Arnaut, 2010; Bertely, 2003; Bertely, Gasché, & Podestá, 2008; Coronado Suzán, 1992; Cuevas Suárez, 2004; Dietz, 2005; Fierro Evans & Rojo Pons, 2012; Flores Farfán, 2011; García & Velasco, 2012; González, 2009; Hamel, 2001; Muñoz Cruz, 2004; Podestá Siri, 2009; Schmelkes, 2005). Hence, the following literature review outlines four major problems in (bilingual) intercultural education initiatives.

1. Indigenous (bilingual) intercultural education is still transitional toward Spanish, and serves to assimilate Indigenous students into mestizo culture. This represents an important contradiction for a state that has been officially multilingual since 1992 and which, in theory, advocates for language and cultural maintenance but practices assimilation policies that still see language and cultural diversity as a problem (Coronado Suzán, 1992; Hamel, 2001). According to an interview with Schmelkes, this may be due to the fact that the teacher union "assigns teacher positions regardless of the Indigenous language the teacher speaks, and in 30% of the cases this is not the language of the community where the teacher is sent to teach" (as cited in Fierro Evans & Rojo Pons, 2012, p. 113). In addition, teaching methods in bilingual schools are imposed from above by the Ministry of Education in Mexico City, and emphasized mostly traditional teaching styles in which the focus is on the teacher, not on the students. García and Velasco (2012) addressed this problem in an ethnographic study conducted in four (bilingual) intercultural schools in Chiapas. According to them, Mexican (bilingual) intercultural education relies mostly on a mechanical learning process, such as memorizing without meaning and copying without literacy (García & Velasco, 2012, p. 12).
2. The second main problem is that Indigenous bilingual intercultural education, in general, is created through the lens of the dominant mestizo culture, not through the lens of Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies, which would give official free textbooks² another cultural perspective (Cuevas Suárez, 2004; Podestá Siri, 2009). This was also the case in Nepal before the Maoist government took power and introduced an internationally founded, multilingual, bottom-up language education project where the creation of teaching materials would be community based (Taylor, in press). In Mexico, educational policies are still centralized in Mexico City, and there is no regionalization of educational programs to give Indigenous peoples the possibility to participate in the design of content and methods of school curricula (Muñoz Cruz, 2004). Bilingual teachers

²School textbooks at primary and secondary school levels are distributed for free to all children attending Mexican public or private schools. These textbooks are created by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (i.e., Ministry of Education).

generally adhere to the same pedagogical practices as those emanating from a Spanish monolingual ideology—a product of their own learning (García & Velasco, 2012); for instance, they have never been trained to teach from their own Indigenous world perspectives (Podestá Siri, 2009). The Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP; i.e., Ministry of Education) designs the curriculum, hires, and trains teachers based on a Western vision of what (bilingual) intercultural education should be. Monoculturalism imbues the entire curriculum. The few pedagogical materials and textbooks in Indigenous languages that exist are mere translations of the textbooks used in the monolingual system.

3. The third group of problems is structural and political in nature. First, it is structural because the SEP divided Indigenous education into two separate responsibilities. On the one hand, the Dirección General de Educación Indígena (DGEI; i.e., General Directorate for Indigenous Education) is responsible for (bilingual) intercultural education at the preschool and primary levels; and, on the other hand, the 2001 Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (CGEIB; i.e., General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education) is responsible for the secondary, high school, and university levels. There is no continuity between the two (Fierro Evans & Rojo Pons, 2012). Second, the problem is also political because the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (i.e., National Union of Education Workers), which has around 1.2 million union members, is a strong political force in Mexico and plays a “structural obstacle” in the reform of the Mexican education system (Arnaut, 2010; Bertely et al., 2008) because it is vote-catching and corrupt. For instance, the too high wages of union members seem to limit the spending in teacher training (Gómez Salgado, 2009).
4. The fourth problem stems from the fact that the intercultural approach generally only focuses on formal education, and formal education is built on written literacy (Flores Farfán, 2011). Intercultural education, therefore, overlooks out-of-school learning and the Indigenous populations’ long history of oral traditions (Coronado Suzán, 1992).

According to the literature review, the four main problems of (bilingual) intercultural education (i.e., assimilation to Spanish and the national culture, creation of Indigenous curricula through the lens of the dominant culture, structural and political problems, and formal education) are the results of the evolution of the dominant culture (i.e., the mestizo identity) in the Mexican context. Before focusing on the study itself, and to understand the cultural and linguistic power relations in Mexico and how they interfere with Indigenous education, it seems imperative to understand the role played by the mestizo identity. A brief historical evolution and how it still influences education today is described in the following section.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF MEXICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

After independence in 1821, the newly created Mexican government saw language diversity as a political problem—a danger to the centralization of power. The government’s solution was to impose Spanish and a unique national identity (the mestizo identity was in Dietz’s, 1999, words an amalgam of Indigenous, European, and colonial elements) as common levelers. According to Basave (1992), this unique identity gave viability to the new government because it unified the Mexican nation. However, critical scholars, such as Gómez Izquierdo and Sánchez Díaz de

Rivera (2011), defined the mestizo identity as an ideology grounded on taxonomies created by the Spaniards, which imposed a racialized social identity based on a colonial caste system. From the state's perspective, the new mestizo identity was intended to help Mexicans evolve from being "biological bastards" to being part of a "cosmic race" by mixing European culture with the glorious past of the Aztec empire (Dietz, 1999). *The Cosmic Race*, an essay written by José Vasconcelo in 1925, the first Mexican Secretary of Education, defended the creation of a new race based on universal knowledge, not on skin color. Since then, Mexico has adhered to a monolingual ideology: one nation, one language, and one identity. The view was that Indigenous peoples had to be "civilized" by being educated in Spanish. This view was accompanied by rural education in the form of "direct teaching" (i.e., to teach directly in Spanish, even if a student's first language was different) and Vasconcelo's *proyecto castellanizador* (Hispanization project; i.e., to teach Spanish to all Mexicans and to use this language as the unique Mexican language), as explained in the following paragraphs.

In the 20th century, the curricula in most rural schools were completely decontextualized (Heath Brice, 1986). Links did not exist between the Spanish world representations in books and students' daily lives. Indigenous cultures were not recognized; there were no references to them in these books. The "direct teaching method" entailed directly submersing children into Spanish—a language they did not understand and that had no meaning for them. Spanish became a tool of subjugation. This perspective gave birth to the so-called *Indigenismo* period—a cultural and ethnic homogenization period—enforced by Vasconcelos.

The Indigenismo policy presented Indigenous cultures in an ambiguous way (Dietz, 1999). On one hand, it suggested that Indigenous peoples were preventing Mexico from entering modernity; and, on the other, it represented Mexico's pre-Hispanic legacy as defining the Mexican mestizo and the cosmic race. The Indigenismo period officially saw the rise of bilingual education, which, Comas (1953) argued, had assimilation as societal and educational aims. He further claimed that bilingual education was designed to be a planned and selective acculturation process to save the pre-Hispanic legacy and eradicate any harmful characteristics of Indigenous cultures (Comas, 1953). The assimilation process was intended to proceed by using the mother tongue (the minority language) in the early school years to teach Spanish (the dominant language). The Ministry of Education's objective at that time was to "Mexicanize the Indians," as expressed by former President Cárdenas (1978) through the promotion of bilingualism (Heath Brice, 1986). The Indigenismo period was marked by the creation of many different governmental organizations whose aim it was to implement the Indigenismo policy on regional and local levels. The Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI; i.e., National Indigenous Institute), for example, was created to focus not only on Indigenous education, but also on the integration of Indigenous peoples into the national and regional economy (Dietz, 1999). From my perspective, what is notorious about these governmental institutions is that they all followed the same objective (i.e., the acculturation toward the mestizo identity through the assimilation to Spanish). Even if Indigenous languages were classified and analyzed during that time, the government's aim was not to recognize these languages at the same level as Spanish (the language of political unity).

The last decade of the 20th century marked a turning point worldwide, with individual and collective identities resisting globalisation, which led to changes in political discourses (Touraine, 1992). To protest against the signature of the North American Free Trade Agreement (between the United States, Canada, & Mexico), the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) made its appearance in the southernmost state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994. The Mexican

government and the EZLN reached an agreement in 1996 called the *Acuerdos de San Andrés Larraízar* (San Andrés Larraízar Agreement) in which “authorities committed to recognizing autonomy, self-determination, and self-management of Indigenous peoples” (Fierro Evans & Rojo Pons, 2012, p. 107). The government never officially accepted the agreements because it would have meant having to officially accept the end of its historical control of Indigenous peoples (Sámano, Alcántara Durand, & González Gómez, 2000). However, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1989), a forerunner of the United Nations’s (2007) Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (i.e., an international tool intended to eliminate human rights violations against Indigenous peoples), created pressure to remove assimilationist orientations internationally. Both international tools give Indigenous people the right to be taught in their first language and to receive an education based on their own cultural values and world perspectives.

Since then, the Mexican Ministry of Education formally integrated the notion of intercultural education to its 1995 through 2000 primary educational programs (Muñoz Cruz, 2004); created a CGEIB for the public secondary, high school, and university levels (DGEI, 1999); and closed the INI. The INI is considered Mexico’s most blatant expression of the Indigenismo period. The latter was replaced by the CDI.³

Even if Indigenous education seems to have moved toward a more social vision in the last few decades, this evolution and the earlier problems undermine the chances of the new (bilingual) intercultural discourse questioning issues of power between dominant and dominated cultures. However, issues of power are essential in multicultural countries with colonial pasts, such as Mexico. The following theoretical framework problematizes the notion of multiculturalism and introduces the term *ethnophagy* (i.e., a smooth transition to the dominant culture through which differences are erased over time), which is found in the results of the ethnographic study, mainly in the (bilingual) intercultural education system.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MULTICULTURALISM AND ETHNOPHAGY

The key theoretical notions that underpin this study involve (neo)liberal multiculturalism and ethnophagy.

Multiculturalism

The context just described the problems in (bilingual) intercultural education that raise the question of how multiculturalism is perceived in Mexico. Perceptions of culture are important in education because they generate knowledge, shape values, and influence how identities are constructed (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 312). Therefore, it seems important to analyze existing perspectives of multiculturalism to understand which one is used by the Mexican state and how this view influences the creation of educational programs.

Kubota (2004) identified three different perspectives of multiculturalism—conservative, liberal, and critical—depending on how the issue of diversity is approached. The conservative

³See <http://www.cdi.gob.mx/>

approach to multiculturalism views cultural difference as a problem that prevents the formation of the nation state. Therefore, differences have to be eradicated. This conservative view was used by the Mexican state during the Indigenismo period, for example. The liberal approach to multiculturalism focuses on a multiculturalism that celebrates cultural differences as an end by itself and that concentrates on cultural artefacts. However, the liberal approach fails to address real issues of power and privilege. The critical approach of multiculturalism, in opposition to the two former approaches, focuses on the relation of power in society and how hegemony can be counter-balanced. In other words, it examines why certain racial groups have been discriminated against and oppressed, and how they can achieve social justice.

According to Díaz Polanco (2006), Mexico favors a neoliberal approach of multiculturalism where diversity is actually recognized as such, but where it is still perceived as a problem that has to be solved through cultural inclusion. Díaz Polanco's view of (neo)liberal multiculturalism is very similar to Kubota's (2004) liberal approach. Both are descriptive models that do not integrate power relations at all and that mainly focus on a containment of cultural differences. Gasché (1997) also referred to this form of multiculturalism as the "angelical utopia," which focuses on educating children toward the respect of cultural differences. Mexicans are, to some extent, multicultural and accept diversity because it exists and because they see it every day, but some also discriminate against Indigenous cultures. This example illustrates how, in multicultural societies, racism can be part of the citizens' habitus (Bourdieu, 1980). An examination of national history books edited by the SEP, in fact, reveals clear racist features presenting Indigenous peoples as the "racial enemy of the Mexican nation" (Gómez Izquierdo, 2008, p. 82).

Hence, critical multiculturalism, as defined earlier by Kubota (2004), would be more appropriate in Mexico. (Bilingual) intercultural education, based on this model, would enable Indigenous peoples to identify and subvert asymmetric power relations. According to Kubota, critical multiculturalism views inequalities of power and racism as pervasive and advocates for the recognition and rights of minorities by supporting critical (language) pedagogies. However, as observed in the research results, Indigenous education seems to be heavily influenced by a (neo)liberal vision of multiculturalism, which leads to a process of ethnophagy.

Ethnophagy

According to Díaz Polanco (2006), (neo)liberal multiculturalism represents a modern form of symbolic violence that aims to generalize internal colonialism, or ethnophagy—that is, a process through which dominant cultures try to subsume different cultures, mostly by imposing national standards over ethnic communities. In other words, (neo)liberal multiculturalism still perceives the mestizo identity as dominant and Indigenous cultures as subordinated. Whereas the (neo)liberal state does not want to destroy or deny the existence of other identities, the ethnophagic state creates an attractive atmosphere where differences dissolve over time, through attraction and transformation. Mexican Indigenous parents, for example, may speak Spanish instead of their native language to their children because Spanish will allow them to get a better education and will offer them better professional opportunities. Hence, ethnophagy implies two important points seen in the results of the study—(a) respect diversity, and (b) promote the participation of minorities in official programs—the aim of which being to convert them to be the principal promoters of the unique identity.

After introducing the study itself, the following sections focus on Indigenous students' accounts and their experiences with (neo)liberal multiculturalism and ethnophagy throughout their education.

THE RESEARCH

This article focuses on the educational experiences of four bilingual Indigenous students enrolled in a special program for minority students in a Mexican university. Because I do not believe in one objective truth, I used multiple methods to construct "validity" triangulation by showing the "diversity of perceptions" (Stake, 2005, p. 454). The triangulation process included a combination of the following:

1. Relevant policy documents, such as the Mexican Ministry of Education's national guidelines regarding (bilingual) intercultural education, and how and where the official discourse is situated in the linguistic and cultural power relations (DGEI, 1999).
2. Three semi-structured interviews with each of the four participants: These interviews concentrated on collecting demographic background data, and focused on the participants' educational experiences in monolingual and (bilingual) intercultural school systems. At the beginning of the first interview, students were asked to complete a self-assessment grid based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)⁴ to determine their competency level in their Indigenous language. Semi-structured interviews followed a question guide, which ensured that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each interviewee (Patton, 2002). My questions intended to elicit information on the students' former schooling processes (monolingual or bilingual), their language uses, and their identities.
3. Natural observations of the context of the Indigenous students' university schooling: These observations focused on linguistic and cultural power relations, although mainly on the relationships between the Indigenous students and their professors and with their non-Indigenous classmates. These observations allowed me to explore the social and historical context in which the linguistic and cultural power relations were embedded.

The analysis of the data embraces Smith's (1999) decolonizing methodology. In other words, it looks for ways to decolonize research by recognizing Indigenous peoples' belief systems and knowledge, and by positioning itself within critical theories that question the hegemony of dominant Western cultures—in this case, the dominant mestizo culture. The study also follows Smith's reminder of the power of research and the need to critique its own gaze and representations, rather than seeing them as the only potential "truth." Hence, this study attempts to initiate a decolonization process of Western research by focusing "on interpreting data from other people's lives" in collaboration with "the other" people (Dodson, Piatelli, & Schmalzbauer, 2007, p. 822); it attempts to involve participants in the data collection process by giving them a voice through

⁴The Common European Framework of Reference is a language-learning, teaching, and assessment reference guide developed by the European Council in 2001 that promotes plurilingualism in Europe. It describes six levels of proficiency to facilitate comparisons. It is used in the university setting where the four participants study. For more details, see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

personal interviews. Nonetheless, I analyzed the macro- and micro-patterns of this study. I am a Western researcher living in Mexico. To gain an Indigenous perspective, the second step of my analysis includes Indigenous students in an attempt to decolonize the research process.

All of the participants in this study self-identified as Indigenous. They all come from small rural communities, labelled as some of Mexico's poorest communities.⁵ In the following section, I briefly present the four participants, their local contexts, and the research.

Jorge and Elizabeth

Jorge and Elizabeth were immersed in a Nahuatl-speaking context before they started university study. Both self-evaluated themselves as having advanced levels of proficiency in Nahuatl, according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). They speak Nahuatl with their parents, grandparents, and older community members. For both, Nahuatl is the first language they learned at home. Both students went to a monolingual public school administered by the SEP, where Spanish was mandatory from the first level of primary grade onward because there was no bilingual or intercultural school where they lived. Today, Elizabeth is in her sixth semester studying agriculture at a university, and Jorge is in his third semester studying political science. For both, being able to study at a university is an honor that conveys a special recognition of them in their local communities. They both speak Nahuatl to each other.

María and Lucia

María and Lucia speak Totonaco. María is in her second semester studying Law, and Lucia is in her sixth semester studying environmental engineering. Both went to bilingual primary schools in their respective communities. María has an intermediate level of Totonaco. She mainly speaks Totonaco with her grandparents and with older people in her community, but her parents speak Spanish to her. Lucia's proficiency level in Totonaco is lower than María's. Lucia self-evaluates her Totonaco as being at the CEFR breakthrough level.⁶ Only in listening, she said, is her proficiency much better. She mainly understands everything. Lucia's paternal grandparents speak Totonaco with each other and with her father. Her mother speaks Nahuatl, but Lucia grew up with her father's family. Therefore, she has not been surrounded by Nahuatl. Lucia and María do not know that they both speak Totonaco, and have never spoken it together.

Research Results⁷

I first focus on Elizabeth's and Jorge's cases, as they attended monolingual schools, and then on María's and Lucia's cases, as they attended (bilingual) intercultural primary schools before attending monolingual secondary schools.

⁵I do not give more detail about their communities to respect participants' anonymity.

⁶The Common European Framework of Reference breakthrough level refers to a very basic personal and familiar language level.

⁷I directly translate students' excerpts into English to save space. All translations are my sole responsibility.

Monolingual schools as catalysts for language and cultural maintenance. Jorge recalled his experiences in the monolingual kindergarten and primary grades, how Spanish was imposed on him at school, and noted that his mother improved her Spanish by helping her children do their homework:

I learnt Spanish because it is a necessity, because when I arrived at school, the teacher only spoke Spanish.

The Principal talked to my parents and told them that it was important for me to learn Spanish. She took me in her class and helped me to switch from Nahuatl to Spanish at school. When I didn't understand, she tried to explain it to me in Nahuatl . . . Then, my parents spoke Spanish with my siblings, and now my siblings are a bit ashamed to answer in Nahuatl . . . they speak more Spanish; Nahuatl is their second language now.

Jorge is aware that his siblings speak less Nahuatl than he does, which is why, when he goes home, he only speaks Nahuatl to everyone, even to his smaller siblings. He does not want them to forget it.

Elizabeth recalls that the mothers of all the children who did not speak Spanish in first grade waited for their children to finish classes on the school patio because the children were afraid of going to school in Spanish. The children felt that the teacher was angry at them because they did not understand anything. This is exactly what Elizabeth's mother wanted to avoid. She lived near the school for 9 years before she had children. She listened to the classes in Spanish, and she learned the language. Elizabeth's mother spoke Spanish to her ever since she was born to save her from the language problems other children had at school. Nevertheless, Elizabeth always answered her mother in Nahuatl:

My mother changed the whole panorama of how families are traditionally because children normally learn Nahuatl first and we learned Spanish first . . . and, because in our community everybody speaks Nahuatl, we were forced to learn it.

In these two cases, the monolingual school was the catalyst for Spanish use, which changed family traditions. Spanish, as they both said, was a necessity to succeed at school. Jorge had to learn to read and write in a language he did not understand at first. There was no bilingual school near either of them, so they had no other choice. What is noteworthy in these two cases is that Jorge and Elizabeth stated that they identify more with Nahuatl than with Spanish.

Elizabeth explains:

Spanish is just a way to communicate with people who do not speak Nahuatl; it does not really represent much to me, because if I am asked to choose between both languages, I would say Nahuatl. I wouldn't mind speaking Nahuatl my whole life.

Jorge expressed it this way:

I am still not very convinced that Spanish represents my Mexican identity. I do not perceive Spanish as an identity. I see it much more as a necessity which connects me to other topics.

This lack of identification with the national identity shows that monolingual schools, as a colonial institution, succeeded in assimilating Elizabeth and Jorge to the Spanish language by using the direct teaching method; however, in their cases, it did not succeed in assimilating them to the

mestizo identity. Both use their agency (i.e., act independently) and use Nahuatl as much as they can to negotiate their respective identities (i.e., they construct their social identities around both languages, even if their schools only focussed on Spanish). Elizabeth answers her mother in Nahuatl, although her mother explicitly switched her home language to Spanish, and Jorge speaks Nahuatl to his smaller siblings. He does so because he regrets seeing them identify more with Spanish; he is afraid they will lose Nahuatl and their Indigenous identity. Both are aware of the repercussions the monolingual school system had on their families' linguistic situation. Therefore, both try to negotiate their identities and reverse the home language shift for which monolingual schooling was the catalyst.

María's and Lucia's cases are different in many ways. First, their parents chose to speak Spanish with them since birth. Their parents did not learn it to help their children at school. Second, both María and Lucía went to bilingual schools that followed a transitional model.

Bilingual schools as the catalyst for (neo)liberal multiculturalism and ethnophagy. María and Lucia went to (bilingual) intercultural primary schools, taught in Totonaco and Spanish. María and Lucia strongly identify with Spanish, as it was their first language at home with their parents. For both, Spanish is a "universal language" that connects them to the outside world. María and Lucia identify with Spanish because it represents their national culture, and with Totonaco because it represents their local culture. Totonaco reminds them of where they come from, of their roots.

At school, María recalled that Totonaco was taught as a "foreign language," and that it was not content-based. In other words, Totonaco was taught as a subject with isolated vocabulary and grammar points, and was not used as a medium of instruction through which subjects, such as mathematics or geography, were taught:

We only had one class of Totonaco. Courses like math were in Spanish . . . Some teachers knew how to speak Totonaco, and others did not; those who spoke the language explained better than those who did not really speak it. We learned more with those who spoke Totonaco.

For Lucia, the reality of her bilingual school was very similar:

They gave us textbooks in Totonaco and tried to teach us. They followed the book page by page.

Teaching was very traditional, and it seems that there was a lack of teacher preparation regarding the teaching of Totonaco. In addition, bilingual teachers, according to Lucia, did not speak Totonaco; they only knew how to sing the national anthem. This confirms the first problem of (bilingual) intercultural education described in the literature review—that is, the teachers' union seems to assign teacher positions regardless of which Indigenous languages teachers speak or if they even speak one. In Lucia's experience, Totonaco was used as a tool to create an identity with the national culture; the aim was not to maintain the language. Merely singing the national anthem in an Indigenous language became a minimum (and sadly, only) requirement to gain bilingual status. Elizabeth said the following:

In order to become a bilingual teacher in one of the intercultural/bilingual schools, you only need to know how to sing the national anthem. Singing the anthem in the Indigenous language is more valuable than speaking it. I speak Nahuatl, but I don't remember the anthem in Nahuatl. I would have to learn it to get hired.

Lucia added:

Our bilingual teachers did not really teach us Totonaco, only the national anthem. The national anthem was mandatory because we had to take part in a competition.

María's and Lucia's experiences at the bilingual school clearly suggest that it was not very different from Jorge's and Elizabeth's experiences, as far as languages are concerned. All four were mainly taught in Spanish. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, in María's and Lucia's cases, the children's Indigenous language was used to encourage them to transition into national culture (e.g., by including the national anthem in Totonaco). In other words, (bilingual) intercultural schools successfully assimilate children to the national culture by using ethnophagy (i.e., by celebrating diversity and giving minorities the possibility to participate in official programs; Díaz Polanco, 2006). It seems that in these two cases, (bilingual) intercultural schools used students' Indigenous identities and, therefore, their languages, to prepare them for learning the national anthem, the most symbolic expression of the mestizo identity.

Lucia enjoyed singing the national anthem in Totonaco:

I like singing the national anthem in Totonaco. It feels good and nice.

(Bilingual) intercultural schools do not seem to aim to put Indigenous cultures and languages on the same level as the national identity and Spanish. When I asked María if non-Indigenous people had to learn an Indigenous language to maintain Indigenous languages, she answered:

In reality, I don't think so. Only very few people are really interested in Indigenous languages. They are not useful. Some people say it's a language of "naco"⁸ . . . Indigenous populations are wiped out.

Hence, according to these results, the study suggests that the monolingual and the bilingual school systems may be the catalysts of two oppositional effects. First, the monolingual schools may catalyze language and cultural maintenance; and second, (bilingual) intercultural schools may catalyze (neo)liberal multiculturalism and ethnophagy. Both are in clear contradiction with what was expected. The following section discusses these results.

DISCUSSION

As shown earlier, the ethnophagic process based on a (neo)liberal vision of multiculturalism can be perceived at various levels of schooling. On the one hand, Jorge's and Elizabeth's experiences suggest that the direct teaching method made students resist assimilating toward the mestizo identity. Neither Elizabeth nor Jorge feel that Spanish represented their national identity, even if they learned the language very well. On the other hand, they used their agency to preserve and maintain Nahuatl and their Indigenous cultures within their own context. In addition, even if they were schooled in the monolingual system, their level of competency in Nahuatl was high. At least in their two cases, the direct teaching method (or Spanish "submersion") did not succeed in making them acculturate into the unique mestizo identity. On the other hand, the (bilingual) intercultural

⁸*Naco* is a pejorative slang word in Mexico that refers to poorly educated people of lower social classes. It may also include poorly educated "nouveau-riche." The word comes from Nahuatl, and may be similar to the North American modern definition of "redneck."

program at María's and Lucía's schools seemed to be more successful in acculturating them. These schools followed the ethnophagic process.

First, because by creating (bilingual) intercultural schools whose main aim is to respect diversity and to create more egalitarian relations between cultures (DGEI, 1999), the Ministry of Education respects and celebrates diversity. However, in these two cases, schools have not ever questioned the hegemony of the mestizo ideology. In Lucía's case, the school celebrated Indigenous cultures by organizing a national anthem competition where students had to sing in Totonaco. María also perceived that interest in Indigenous cultures seems to be superficial in Mexico because only a few people are really interested in learning any of those languages. Her comment suggests that Indigenous populations do not even exist on the map in Mexico (both figuratively and literally).

Second, with regard to the participation of minorities in official programs, in (bilingual) intercultural programs, all teachers are supposed to be Indigenous and bilingual; however, because of the political and structural problems described earlier, most of María's and Lucía's teachers did not speak Totonaco, even if they were Indigenous.

María and Lucía's experiences suggest that (bilingual) intercultural schools capitalized on students' awareness of Totonaco culture and language to assimilate them in the national culture. María and Lucía love singing the national anthem in Totonaco because they feel closer to the language; they identify with their local communities and Indigenous cultures and languages because those are their roots, but Spanish and the mestizo identity represent their national culture, and they are proud of it. Although, if they were schooled in (bilingual) intercultural schools and should have developed proficiency in the Indigenous language, their level is much lower than Jorge's and Elizabeth's, who were schooled in monolingual schools. By comparing the monolingual and the (bilingual) intercultural systems, in these four accounts, it becomes apparent that the second system is more successful in assimilating students to Spanish and the national culture. This finding is contradictory for a multicultural country that advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, this article questioned whether (bilingual) intercultural programs are based on a vision of multiculturalism that questions unequal relations of power and empowers Indigenous students, or whether, despite official changes toward the recognition of Indigenous cultures and languages, Mexico's Indigenous education system still tended to assimilate students into Spanish and the unique mestizo culture. The literature review and the context of (bilingual) intercultural education in Mexico suggested that state ideology has not noticeably shifted from its assimilationist trends. The results of the study, as expressed through the voices of four Indigenous student participants, suggest that the monolingual education system may result in students' resistance to the monocultural and monolingualist ideologies and greater identification with Indigenous languages and cultures. The (bilingual) intercultural system, on the other hand, is based on a (neo)liberal vision of multiculturalism that does not confront different identities, thus recreating ethnophagy or a process through which Indigenous cultures dissolve over time. In the multicultural (bilingual) intercultural system, students may (ironically) end up identifying more with Spanish and the unique mestizo culture than their peers in the monolingual school system.

Hence, the Indigenismo (i.e., the cultural and ethnic homogenization period) seems not to be over. Instead, it found new tools to achieve its goal.

Top-down (bilingual) intercultural programs will not meet the international objectives of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO, 1989) or of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007) if they do not question unequal cultural power relations based on formerly racialized caste systems in Latin American countries with colonial pasts. In the case of Mexico, the state needs to switch to a critical vision of multiculturalism by negotiating power between languages and cultures (Bertely, 2003; Bertely et al., 2008; Dietz, 2005; Muñoz Cruz, 2004; Podestá Siri, 2009; Schmelkes, 2005). More research is needed regarding how to question and negotiate this power within (bilingual) intercultural programs in Mexico.

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