

## **To Be or not to Be Indigenous: Oaxacan Children's Self-Identification as Indigenous People**

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to present the self-identification as Indigenous people of six children who spoke an Indigenous language and were part of a sixth grade classroom in an urban elementary school with a culturally and linguistically diverse student body in Oaxaca, Mexico. During an academic year, the data was collected qualitatively through three interviews and numerous classroom observations and informal interactions with the children during recess time. The data was analyzed in a recursive and iterative manner using feminist and post-structural theories that regard identity as multiple and dynamic, as a site of struggle and changing over time, and as situated unfinished dialogic processes subject to historicization and the recognition of others (Blommaert, 2005; Hall, 1996; Norton, 2000). First, the current situation of Indigenous peoples' languages is briefly discussed, followed by a short section on the theoretical framework and methodology. After this, the children's self-identification is presented. It is concluded that we have to demystify concepts, such as "Indigenous," that place Indigenous peoples in "lower" positions and that our research has to work towards unveiling deficit language ideologies hidden in concepts and co-constructing Indigenous children's agency in order to resist and challenge the positions imposed on them.

Benito was born in San José Piedras Negras, Pochutla, a Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico. When Benito was twelve years old, he moved to the city of Oaxaca to live with a family he did not know. His brother and his sister live with this family, too. Benito is in charge of cleaning the whole house, and works at this family's drugstore after school. Benito and his siblings are not allowed to speak Zapotec, their Indigenous language, in this house: "The *señora* scolds us. We are talking, and then she goes to scold, 'tell me what you are saying', she says." Benito's older brother is losing his Zapotec after living in the city for two years. Will this happen to Benito as well? If Benito loses his

Zapotec, will he still be considered “Indigenous” by others and by himself? If he does not self-identify as Indigenous, will he lose all the rights entitled to Indigenous groups in Mexico?

In Mexico, Article 2 of the Constitution, modified in 2001, defines Indigenous peoples as “those who descend from the groups who inhabited the actual territory at the beginning of colonization and who preserve their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions or part of those [institutions]... Consciousness of their Indigenous identity must be a fundamental criterion...” (Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 2009, p 1, my translation). Nevertheless, many people in Mexico who are descendants of the original inhabitants prefer not to be identified as Indigenous because, throughout history, this designation has labeled them as ignorant, uneducated and uncivilized (López Gopar, Stakhnevich, León Garcia, & Morales Santiago 2006; Montes García 2004). Paradoxically, with recent reforms, Indigenous peoples have gained some linguistic and legal rights (INALI 2009). In 2003, Mexico approved the “Law of Indigenous Peoples’ Linguistic Rights” and created the National Institute of Indigenous Languages. The main objectives of this organization are to promote Indigenous languages, to ensure the success of Indigenous peoples, and to foster support among the rest of the Mexican population to enhance the value of these languages and cultures. In addition, different organizations and institutions are offering Indigenous peoples scholarships and special benefits (e.g. Ford Foundation Grants). Access to these rights, legal and linguistic, may be denied to Benito if he loses his Zapotec, denies being Indigenous and/or ignores what the term indigenous means as we shall see later.

The purpose of this paper is to present the self-identification as Indigenous people of six children who spoke an Indigenous language. They were part of a sixth grade classroom in an urban elementary school with a culturally and linguistically diverse student body in Oaxaca, Mexico. During an academic year, the data was collected qualitatively through three interviews, numerous classroom observations, and informal interactions with the children during recess time. The data was analyzed in a recursive and iterative manner, using feminist and post-structural theories that regard identity as multiple and dynamic, as a site of struggle and changing over time, and as situated unfinished dialogic processes subject to historicization and the recognition of others (Blommaert 2005; Hall 1996; Norton 2000). First, I will briefly discuss the current situation of Indigenous peoples' languages, followed by a short section on the theoretical framework and methodology. After this, I will present these children's self-identification.

### *Languages of Indigenous Peoples in Oaxaca, Mexico*

The State of Oaxaca is located in the southern part of Mexico, close to Guatemala. Oaxaca has a population of 3,506,821 (INEGI 2006). Of these, 1,091,502 are Indigenous. However, Barabas (1999) argues that this number is or should be much higher and that the exaggerated proportion of the so-called non-Indigenous (*mestizo*) population is the result of Indigenous identity loss and cultural elements tied to Indigenous languages: “. . . speaking a “dialect” [pejorative term to refer to Indigenous languages] is considered a custom of Indians, associated with an inferior identity” (p 164, my translation). Despite linguistic and racist prejudices (Montes García 2004), Oaxaca is the most culturally and linguistically diverse state in Mexico. It has distinct ethnic groups such as Zapotec, Mixtec, Chatino, Triqui, and Mixe to mention a few. African Blacks have also been recognized as an Indigenous ethnic group, (eds

Barabas & Bartolomé 1999). Thanks to Indigenous educators' activism (Hernández Díaz 2004), there are sixteen Indigenous languages officially recognized by the Government: Chinanteco, Chatino, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixtec, Triqui, Zapotec, and so forth (see a map of Oaxaca and its Indigenous languages at <http://www.ieepo.gob.mx/2n1.htm>). As we saw, Benito speaks Zapotec. Two other children, Alex and Roberto, speak Chatino, and the other three, Guillermina, Edgar and Noé, speak Triqui.

### *Theoretical Framework and Methodology*

At the onset of the research project, I classified these six children as Indigenous. However, I was making my decision based mainly on their language proficiency. I had fallen into the trap that sees ethnolinguistic identity as “stable, uncontroversial, and intuitively correct . . . an identity expressed through belonging to a particular language community and articulated in statements such as . . . ‘I am British [ergo I speak English]’ (Blommaert 2005, p 215 quotations marks and brackets in original). I always felt uncomfortable with classifying these children as Indigenous since I was not sure about their own sense of belonging to an Indigenous group. I attempted to move away from essentialist conceptions of identity, since Hall (1996) and Denos, Toohey, Neilson, and Waterstone (2009) stress the fact that identities are situated, subject to a radical historicization, unfinished and in process, and that people exert their agency in discursive practices to construct affirming identities or reject imposed identities that position them in certain ways.

In spite of its complexity, it is important to analyze the distinction between Indigenous and *mestizo*, for it is used by governmental, educational, and social institutions as their “politics of exclusion” (Hall 1996, p 2). Some institutions *differentiate* Indigenous from *mestizo* based mainly on language proficiency, while others consider place of origin, community recognition,

and self-identification as most important. Hence, I was concerned about these children, especially because they had moved away from their Indigenous communities. Due to their migratory lives, some of them had started losing their Indigenous language, and possibly the recognition from their communities, and consequently their self-identification.

In order to give voice to these children's perspectives on their Indigenous identity, I decided to ask them whether or not they could tell someone was Indigenous and if they would self-identify as Indigenous and for what reason(s) (In this paper, I will focus mainly on their self-identification). The strategy to inquiry about their self-identification was motivated by official surveys conducted nationwide in Mexico containing questions on family, housing, and education. My question was hypothetical yet as if taken from these known surveys: "If they asked you, 'Do you consider yourself to be an Indigenous person?' What would you respond? Why?" In the following sections, I will present the results of this inquiry.

### *Children's Self-Identification as Indigenous People*

**Mario:** Benito, how do you know if a person is Indigenous?

**Benito:** (Pause 7 seconds). What is Indigenous or what [are you asking me]?

**Mario:** Mmm.

**Benito:** (Pause 3 seconds). What is Indigenous, you are saying? I do not know.

The term Indigenous was simply unknown to Benito. After I explained to him what Indigenous implied according to the constitution, he identified various classmates who spoke an Indigenous language as Indigenous people. I asked him what he would say if someone asked him if he was Zapotec, and Benito instantly replied, "Yes, because I speak Zapotec." Benito's

identity was connected to his Zapotec identity, and not the term used by the Mexican constitution.

As we saw there were five other students, besides Benito, who spoke an Indigenous language. For these students, the term Indigenous and their self-identification as such presented different problems. For Alex, Roberto, and Edgar, my questions regarding their self-identification as Indigenous created an awkward situation. These three students were able to identify *other* people as Indigenous based on those people's language and traditional clothing. Nevertheless, when I asked Alex whether or not he would self-identify as Indigenous, he replied, "I do not know." For their answers regarding Indigenous self-identification, Roberto and Edgar opted to pause for a long time, (7 second pause) and (13 second pause) respectively. Those long pauses expressed racist and classist meanings regarding the term Indigenous, but Roberto and Edgar were not ready or were too shy to verbalize them (Noé will do this for us later on). The same as Benito, when I asked Roberto and Edgar whether they would consider themselves Chatino and Triqui respectively, they both immediately replied affirmatively due to their proficiency in these languages.

Guillermina's self-identification was complex. Guillermina was able to identify Indigenous people because of their language and their traditional clothing, too. This is my dialogue with Guillermina regarding her Indigenous self-identification:

**Mario:** Hey, Guille, if someone asked you if you considered yourself Indigenous, what would you say?

**Guillermina:** Mmm, maybe yes.

**Mario:** Why?

**Guillermina:** (Pause 3 seconds). Just because.

**Mario:** What would that “maybe yes” mean?

**Guillermina:** Who knows, it depends on how they see you.

**Mario:** How?

**Guillermina:** It depends on how they listen to you; [it depends] if they have already listened to you speaking [an Indigenous language] and if nobody knows.

Guillermina’s Indigenous self-identification was not straightforward. She had the agency to decide whether or not she would present herself as or admit to being an Indigenous person. Her decision would depend on whether people perceived her as such. If people had heard her speaking Triqui, she would have no choice but to admit her indigenusness. However, if people did not know about her Indigenous language abilities, it would be her decision to present herself as such or not. If Guillermina felt that people *saw* her or any Indigenous people in accepting or discriminatory ways, she would answer accordingly.

Noé was able to quickly provide characteristics about Indigenous people. He had met Indigenous people from different places in downtown Oaxaca because he started working as a street vendor when he was 6 years old. Nevertheless, Noé also had difficulty with the Indigenous label that I was imposing on him with my questions. He elaborated on the discriminatory connotations the word Indigenous had in downtown Oaxaca and said that this word was even used by Indigenous peoples to insult each other:

**Mario:** If they asked you, “Do you consider yourself Indigenous?” What would you say?

**Noé:** (Pause 3 seconds). I do not know (He chuckles nervously).

**Mario:** What do you think? (Pause 3 seconds) . . . Would you prefer if they asked you, “Are you Triqui?” (Pause 3 seconds). Have you heard that word before?

**Noé:** Which one? Indigenous?

**Mario:** Yes, Indigenous.

**Noé:** Well, yes, we, with our cousins and our classmates, we get along like that (Mario: Mmm). Before I did not know what Indigenous meant. They called me [Indigenous] (Noé shakes his head in disapproval). I remember one time when I asked a teacher (at Noé's previous school). I asked him what Indigenous was, and he told me that it was a person who speaks *idio... dialecto* (language, dialect). Since then, my classmates started calling me 'Indigenous.' (Mario: Mmm) They would call me, "*Pinche Indígena*" (Damn Indigenous). Since then, I realized [what Indigenous meant]. I would tell them, "As if you did not speak dialect, too. You are also Indigenous." I would tell them that.

**Mario:** Mmm. That means that your classmates, who used to call you this, also spoke an Indigenous language like Zapotec or Triqui.

**Noé:** (While nodding) Like Zena, Edgar's brother, he keeps calling me "Indigenous" sometimes.

**Mario:** Ah, Edgar's brother?

**Noé:** Mmm. And sometimes also my brother, Eliseo . . . calls me Indigenous.

"Hurry up, Indigenous," he tells me sometimes. I just ignore him.

Noé's detailed account of the use of the term Indigenous filled the gap in the other children's reluctance to self-identify as Indigenous and Guillermina's strategic self-identification. These children had probably learned or heard various racist, classist, and/or linguistic prejudice meanings for the term. Possibly, discrimination against Indigenous people

begins when they are labeled as such. I wonder if Benito will soon learn the negative connotations of this term.

### ***Conclusion***

Noé revealed the connotations of the term Indigenous for me. I had read about these discriminatory meanings. However, they were distant in a way. These children taught me—and Mexican legislators and legal officers, human rights organizations, organizations that provide grants for “Indigenous,” and educational institutions that decide to adopt “affirmative action-type” policies—that Mexican children grow up in a society where the term Indigenous is complex and that our educational systems, laws, and policies need to treat the term Indigenous as such, a term that is (re)constructed according to many socio-cultural factors and ideologies. I learned from these children that we have to demystify concepts such as “Indigenous” and “dialect,” which place Indigenous people in “lower” positions. In other words, our research has to work towards unveiling deficit language ideologies hidden in concepts and co-constructing Indigenous children’s agency in order for them to resist and challenge the positions that *mestizo* people might continue imposing on them. These children teach us that if language rights are based on “fixed” constructs, they will simply decorate democratic societies’ constitutions, but will not work for the people they intend to protect, such is the case of the Indigenous children in Mexican urban centers.

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