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Cultural knowledge as opportunities for empowerment: Learning and development for Mexican Indigenous youth

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ABSTRACT

Educators are often unaware of assets Mexican Indigenous children possess that originate from their cultural practices. Using Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Indigenous Heritage Saberes, our studies focus on three unique Indigenous learning communities that provide opportunities of empowerment for these students. We examine the experiences of Triqui middle school students in a Youth Participatory Action Research club and how it facilitated their use of research as a decolonizing tool to hold knowledge inside the school. We explore how Oaxacan students maintain their cultural traditions via a learning community created byan Oaxacan philharmonic band. Lastly, we investigate the experiences of Yucatec-Maya youth with cultural community organization programs that instill knowledge of and pride in their Indigenous identity. Our studies contribute to the critical conversations about equity in education for Mexican Indigenous youth. Recommendations are made for educators and community organizations working with Mexican Indigenous students.

Introduction

Mexican Indigenous students, at the margins of invisibility in their school contexts, are a growing population in the U.S. frequently overlooked by researchers and educators (Barillas-Chón, 2010; Casanova, 2019; Pentón Herrera, 2019a; Ruiz & Barajas, 2012). These students have inequitable access to educational and economic resources and are often linguistically and culturally misunderstood (Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016; Mesinas & Perez, 2016; Morales et al., 2019). The knowledge and traditions of Latinx Indigenous communities are not always valued and as a result, educators lose insight on assets possessed by Mexican Indigenous youths, such as smartness (Hatt, 2007), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Understanding the assets Mexican Indigenous students bring to the classroom is critical for achieving educational equity for Latinx students, our largest minoritized student population (Casanova, 2019).

Cultural practices can facilitate learning communities to youth by allowing them to make meaningful contributions to their communal endeavors (Rogoff, 2014). Less is known about how cultural learning influences Mexican Indigenous students. We use Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI) to center on the transnational lived experiences of Indigenous persons (Blackwell et al., 2017), and Indigenous heritage saberes, complex understandings based on familial and communal knowledges (Urrieta, 2013), to examine learning communities for Mexican Indigenous youth.

Therefore, our overarching research question asks how Mexican Indigenous people recreate their own cultural practices, including traditions and languages, to facilitate three unique learning communities that provide opportunities for self-claimed empowerment (Ruiz, 1997) through assets such as

sense of belonging, multilingualism, agency, and social identity development. To address our question, we present three studies focusing on how the learning communities Mexican Indigenous students and adults [re]create and sustain across diasporic contexts can contribute to the development of assets that may be transferable to other spaces (e.g., classrooms). We use CLI to highlight examples of strengths-based, culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies that center on the knowledge production of Indigenous communities.

Mexican Indigenous populations

Mexican Indigenous youth are part of transnational communities existing within and across the physical and cultural borders of Mexico and the U.S. Mexican Indigenous populations have long been marginalized within the Mexican boundaries of a *mestizo* national identity (Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016). Mestizaje refers to the mixture of European-Spanish and Indigenous races of Mexican origin persons (Del Val, 2004). Mestizaje simplifies the complicated diasporic experiences of Mexican Indigenous communities, erasing the sociohistorical and problematic legacy of colonialism that has shaped much of the experiences and scholarship around Mexican Indigenous groups (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). Thus, we take a critical perspective in understanding the learning experiences of Mexican Indigenous students. We center on their Indigeneity, acknowledging their diasporic experiences, and contesting the strategic essentialism and invisibility of mestizaje.

Indigenous communities in Mexico are linguistically and culturally diverse and mostly reside in Mexico's rural areas (Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016). Within Mexico, these Indigenous communities face exclusion, racism, and poverty (Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016). Due to the reduction of traditional agrarian economies, many Indigenous families migrate to urban areas within Mexico, where they encounter discrimination against them due to their Indigenous language and socioeconomic status (Pérez-Rendón, 2011). The continued social stratification of Mexican Indigenous populations to the lowest socioeconomic levels leads them to migrate to the U.S. (Cornelius et al., 2007).

In the U.S. Mexican Indigenous communities face continued marginality as they confront intergroup racism within the Latinx communities and xenophobia from non-Latinx persons (Casanova, 2012; Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016). Policies and sociolinguistic attitudes formed by centuries of colonization that have stigmatized Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities impact the adaptation of Mexican Indigenous communities in the U.S. (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). Often, researchers and educators dismiss Indigenous cultural practices as deficits in Mexican Indigenous students instead of understanding them as actual strengths for these students' learning, including collaborative practices and multilingual repertoires.

Theoretical framework: critical Latinx Indigeneities & Indigenous heritage saberes

Given the deficit-oriented research and education practices Indigenous students face, it is important for scholars to analyze the experiences of Indigenous communities through appropriate and respectful frameworks. Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI) centers on the intersectional experiences of Indigenous communities by recognizing that Indigenous communities and families exist within multiple colonial contexts, and transcend physical and cultural borders and ideologies (Blackwell et al., 2017; Urrieta & Calderón, 2019). CLI focuses on structures and institutions that contribute to the marginalization and erasure of the experiences of Indigenous communities throughout Latin America and the United States. We examine the cultural knowledge that is embedded in Indigenous familial and community practices which span transnational networks that are often overlooked by institutions such as schools. CLI provides a platform toexplore the varied ways cultural knowledge is an asset for Mexican Indigenous learners. The cultural learning that these students engage with can become a source of resistance to colonial structures that make their Indigeneities invisible, thus affording

Mexican Indigenous students opportunities for empowerment (Blackwell et al., 2017; Urrieta & Calderón, 2019).

In addition to CLI, we use Indigenous Heritage Saberes (Urrieta, 2013) as diasporic community knowledge (Urrieta & Martínez, 2011) to situate the experiences of Indigenous people. Indigenous heritage saberes are knowings and understandings of the world that are rooted in familial and communal knowledge systems and traditions, while also encompassing greater social, natural, and spiritual well-being (Urrieta, 2013). Indigenous heritage saberes originate in native pueblos and are brought into new spaces when Indigenous people migrate to new locations (Blackwell et al., 2017). Many Indigenous people from Mexico and Central America arrive in the United States and maintain their cultural practices, Indigenous language use and region-specific celebrations (Casanova, 2019) Urrieta (2016) describes this phenomenon including the saberes and smartness developed by Indigenous youth, as diasporic community knowledge. Diasporic community knowledge encourages youth to be agentic and contribute to collective endeavors at young ages (Alcalá et al., 2014). Since these Indigenous practices have important implications for children's cognitive, social, and cultural development, it is important for educators to notice the learning experiences and assets Indigenous youth learn in their communities. Such knowledge can help educators expand their perspectives on their pedagogy that contributes to students' self-efficacy and self-worth (Casanova, 2019; Mejia-Arauz et al., 2015; Urrieta, Mesinas, & Martínez, 2019).

Current studies

To better understand the lived experiences of youth in these learning communities, we operationalize the CLI and Indigenous Heritage Saberes frameworks through the use of Indigenous methodologies across our three studies. Indigenous methodologies are needed to create academic and pedagogical paradigms that allow for the agency of Indigenous youth and their communities to be recognized and valued, rather than dismissed (Blackwell et al., 2017; Kovach, 2018). Decolonizing methodologies must involve Indigenous peoples in the production, transformation, and mobilization of knowledge for and by their communities (Smith, 1999).

Our three studies use decolonizing methodologies through partnerships that we forged with our Indigenous communities as Mexican Indigenous researchers. In particular, these studies were selected since they show how cultural knowledge and practices (saberes) in the context of diasporic lived experiences of Mexican Indigenous communities (CLI) contribute to the development and sustainment of valuable assets for Mexican Indigenous students. Through decolonizing methodologies, we bring Indigenous cultural knowledge, communal cultural practices, and community networks that exist in the learning communities to the forefront of our qualitative research analysis.

For example, the first study examines how seven Triqui, second-generation, Indigenous Oaxaqueño students experience cultural, linguistic, and structural processes in a middle school in rural California. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is used to operationalize CLI and saberes by disrupting the traditional belief of who holds knowledge and power within an educational institution, while centering students as knowledge creators (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). YPAR as methodology and pedagogy creates a space for students to use their culture as a decolonizing tool. Study 2 examines an intergenerational, Oaxacan philharmonic band as a learning community by using ethnographic participant-observation and intergenerational interviewing methods to operationalize CLI and Indigenous heritage saberes. This methodology analyzes the decolonizing practices adults use to convey Indigenous practices to transmit forms of cultural knowledge to the youth that are not often present in their institutionalized school settings. Similarly, Study 3 operationalizes CLI and Indigenous heritage saberes through grounded theory analysis of participant-observations and student and staff interviews. This analysis focuses on the role cultural organizations take as learning spaces in mobilizing cultural knowledge and in the passing down of decolonizing practices. Together, through various analytical methods, in line with Indigenous decolonial research methods, the three studies contribute to reframing what learning means for Mexican Indigenous students in the context of Indigenous

community spaces and how the learning that is occurring can be applied to other spaces (e.g., the classroom).

Study 1

Through YPAR and CLI, this study examines how second-generation Triqui, Indigenous Oaxacan students experience cultural, linguistic, and structural processes in their school setting. YPAR, as a decolonizing methodology, gives students the power to tell their stories (Scorza et al., 2017). YPAR disrupts the power structures that students are subjected to in the educational system (Bertrand et al., 2017) and creates a space where students hold the knowledge. CLI is useful in this study to view students' experiences beyond macro-structures and across national borders (Blackwell et al., 2017). Triqui students engaged in research rooted in Indigenous knowledge through a "process of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples" (Smith, 1999, p. 126).

Method

Participants and setting
The YPAR took place in a rural agricultural middle school in California with 8th grade students. Of the enrolled students at Frida Kahlo Middle School, 90.7% come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged community, and 37.1% are classified as English Language Learners (California Department of Education, 2019c). Seventy-two percent of the teachers are white, and 28% Latinx, yet 98.3% of students identified as Latinx (California Department of Education, 2019a). However, there is no data on the number of Indigenous Latinx students in the school. Seven second-generation Triqui students participated in YPAR.

Procedures
The study consisted of two phases. The first phase involved building rapport with students during their Spring semester. The third author, a Zapoteca Indigenous woman, had previously facilitated cultural and educational workshops for the school. The principal gave her access to the seventh-grade cohort. She gave classroom presentations to recruit students for the study. During the second phase, in the Fall semester, students met every Friday during lunch and established the club and created the club logo. At the end of the semester, the students created a presentation about their Triqui culture for their teachers. The researcher collected memos, meeting observation notes, students' teacher presentation, and student interviews conducted during phases 1 and 2.

Analysis
Stringer (2007) suggests two approaches to analyze data from a YPAR study: (a) coding and categorizing and (b) selecting key transformational moments from the study. Narrative inquiry methods of analysis informed two rounds of descriptive coding and categorizing (Saldaña, 2014). For the second approach, she analyzed key student experiences (Stringer, 2007). Three transformational moments emerged: (a) the presentation to the teachers, (b) creation of the club and logo, and (c) a school fight.

In using this narrative inquiry approach, the third author consistently re-centered on the expertise of the students. CLI and YPAR required a collaborative relationship among all parties involved in the research. YPAR place validity and reliability in the participant narratives. To systemically build on the credibility and trustworthiness when analyzing the data, the third author reviewed codes with four academic researchers and a long-time Indigenous community organizer who works with Oaxaqueño families. The analysis was completed from the CLI perspective that this research should be conducted by and for indigenous communities (Urrieta & Calderón, 2019).

Results

The YPAR project revealed that Triqui students encounter forms of alienation due to their Indigeneity, the same Indigeneity that empowers them to confront the often hostile process of schooling. The second-generation Triqui students' Indigeneity was shaped by their Indigenous language. Additionally, the discrimination they faced in school led them to claim a sense of belonging to their parents' home state: Oaxaca, Mexico. Lastly, students were unable to build trusting relationships with their teachers due to language barriers and the teachers' lack of knowledge of their students' culture.

The seven participants' primary home language was Triqui. During the interviews, all seven students born in the U.S. claimed their Triqui identity more than their Oaxaqueño identity. When the third author asked a student if she identified as Oaxaqueña, she said, "no because Oaxaca refers to people who speak only Spanish, and we speak Triqui. We are Indigenous." Students also claimed their language identity when they got into a fight inside the school because other students were making fun of their Oaxaqueño background. When the third author asked the students why they got into a fight, they said, "no nos vamos a dejar."[1] When asked who was making fun of them, they said "las Españolas," who were not students from Spain, but the Latinx students who speak two languages [Spanish and English]. Whereas, as one Indigenous Triqui student stated, "we speak three, Triqui, Spanish, and English." Students connected their identity with the language they speak, and the club provided the space to be vocal about it.

The discrimination students encountered at school creates a state of violence against their Indigenous bodies (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). The YPAR space allowed the students to develop their Indigenous identity, despite being stigmatized within the school due to this identity. The students reappropriated the derogatory term, oaxaquita(o), used to discriminate against them by naming their club Las Oaxaquitas. This intentional action was a statement of pride and rejection of how other students view them. The students created a club logo which included drawings that represented their parents' towns in Oaxaca and the quote: "Orgullosa de ser Oaxaqueña."[2] While there was a negotiation on whether to use the word Oaxaqueña or Indigenous, some of the students did not want to use the word Indigenous as they said, "people have a negative perspective of Indigenous people," and they decided to go with Oaxaqueña instead.

Lastly, students built relationships with each other, but did not feel comfortable sharing their culture and language with their teachers. Teachers also assumed students spoke English. Two students who attended school in Oaxaca described teachers in the US as disrespectful to their students. As a result, students did not fully participate in the classroom. To address this issue, students created a presentation about their culture to share with their teachers. This example reflects the students' agency in claiming a space to belong in the school.

Discussion

It is vital for educators and educational leaders to learn about the backgrounds of the diverse students they serve. The YPAR project demonstrates how creating intentional spaces for students to build relations based on their Indigenous background and cultural knowledge support students' sense of belonging and identity development. Students were able to build deeper relationships with one another as they learned about their shared cultural backgrounds. These peer connections were important to counter the students' past reactionary behaviors in class. Most of the students who participated in the YPAR project were categorized as having "behavioral issues" in class. However, little attention has been given to the social and structural conditions that contribute to this behavior (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

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[1]We are not going to allow it.
[2]"Proud to be Oaxaqueña".

Ultimately, the students found the YPAR meetings were spaces where they could learn to conduct research regarding the school structures, but also connect with their peers and learn from each other about their shared cultural practices and Indigeneities. They intentionally reclaimed this space to make a statement of resistance in the school setting. Study 2 focuses outside of the school setting, on familial and communal learning.

Study 2

The second study examines Indigenous ways of learning for Mexican Indigenous youth in socio-cultural contexts outside of schools, including everyday activities found at home and in communities (Battiste, 2002; Rogoff, 2014). These cultural practices can manifest into cultural learning communities, yet, these forms of knowledge are overlooked by institutions such as schools. The study builds on CLI, diasporic community knowledge, and smartness developed in relation to familial and communal life (Urrieta, 2016). Research on Indigenous communities suggests that children's contributions to familial and communal endeavors are integral for children's learning and development (Alcalá et al., 2014). Youth learn meaningful skills and saberes, such as responsibility and collaborative integration (Urrieta, 2013) in collective activities with adults. This study examines Banda Oaxaqueña as a learning community that socializes youth in ancestral, diasporic knowledge systems through an intergenerational and transnational approach not found in their schools.

Method

Participants and setting

Banda Oaxaqueña is located in an urban city outside of Los Angeles, California. There are 27 youth members between the ages of eight and seventeen, 11 adults from the ages of eighteen to early sixties, and two co-directors, Jimena and Mateo. Additionally, the band welcomes college-attending members who visit their hometown during school breaks. Banda Oaxaqueña highlights the Indigenous cultural practices from a Zapotec speaking pueblo from Oaxaca, Mexico who created a diaspora in the United States. Most of the youth are U.S.- born. and attend a public school district with Title 1 programming and free/reduced lunch. The district enrollment by ethnicity is 94.2% Latinx, 4.5% African-American, 0.6% white, and 0.2% Pacific Islander (California Department of Education, 2019b).

The band holds practice in a conveniently-located elementary school that is accessible to participants. Mateo, band members, and parents, set up the cafeteria by moving the tables in a square so they can all see each other. Band members and parents help unload instruments, music stands, and folders and place them in the center of the square. Next, band members set up their music stands and play their instruments on their own. Either Jimena or Mateo usually walk around and instruct from the middle of the square. Once practice ends, everyone helps reorganize the tables and load the equipment onto Mateo's truck.

Procedure

The second author, also a Zapoteca Indigenous woman, contacted directors and parent representatives of Banda Oaxaqueña to partner with them for this study. In a parent meeting, she shared her goal to learn about the cultural practices the band teaches and its implications for youth by conducting ethnographic observations, video-recordings practices/performances, and interviewing band members.

As a participant-observer the second author helped the band set up the cafeteria for practice and observed 24 rehearsals and 14 performances. Practice sessions lasted for two hours on Thursdays and Fridays, and four hours on Sundays. The second author had informal conversations with youth, parents, and co-directors to learn more about the band as a learning community. Additionally, she was invited to attend *tocadas*, a Spanish term for performances, including a college graduation party and

an annual patron saint celebration. Her positionality within the community shows how cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) can bring a researcher and a community to collaborate on collective experiences and community memory that allows for a co-creation of knowledge.

Analysis

This study examines what practices Banda Oaxaqueña uses in their intergenerational learning community to transmit knowledge in a transnational community. To analyze the practices found in Banda Oaxaqueña, observations and video recordings from practices and performances were used as resources for data construction to develop strategies for focusing attention on phenomena (Erickson, 2006). Field notes and content logs were created to identify segments for analysis and provided a systemic format to examine the unit of analysis and emergent codes (Emerson et al., 2011). Practices were defined as interactions between 1) one individual and an artifact and 2) two people (or more), including what is being said, what is being done, and the artifacts being used. The foci of analysis are the emergent codes for practices and music genres.

Language was analyzed to understand the role of translanguaging, a process by which bilingual speakers engage in complex discursive practices to make sense of and communicate in multilingual environments (García & Sylvan, 2011), among co-directors, youth, and adults in their communication. The music content was examined to learn what type of genres the band plays and highlight the musical repertoires the youth were exposed to during their participation.

Results

The data revealed two emergent themes that highlight the culturally specific practices used in Banda Oaxaqueña. The themes, multilingual instruction/communication and music content, are salient to the specific learning community constructed through the band's practices.

Multilingual instruction and communication

Throughout the band's time together in rehearsals and performances, three languages are used: Spanish, English, and Zapotec. When Jimena leads practice, she simultaneously uses English and Spanish to teach music technique and to guide the band as they play songs together. Jimena constantly uses Spanish and English as she teaches the band as a whole and while engaging one on one. Mateo uses Spanish to teach the band when he leads practice while using Zapotec with a few older adults. Given that rehearsals take at least eight hours per week, the youth and adults are consistently exposed to three different languages.

This finding is significant because most of the youth only receive English as their primary instructional language in their formal schooling. The band's multilingual setting provides youth and adults a learning community free of restraints on their language use. In other words, they are encouraged to use any and all of their language repertoires to engage in their learning (García & Sylvan, 2011). This multilingualism is a valuable opportunity for youth to engage in a practice that can contribute to their cultural identity development. As Jimena reviews a song titled "2 de Febrero,"[3] with the band she says, "No se les olvide la repetición.[4] I think the volume was good, buen[5] balance. Estamos cortando un poco de las notas."[6]This quote is an example of the language hybridity Jimena uses throughout her teaching.

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[3]Second of February.
[4]Do not forget the repetition.
[5]good
[6]We are cutting a couple of the notes.

Intergenerational music content

Banda Oaxaqueña engages youth and adult participants with intergenerational content that promotes ties to their Indigenous pueblo, Mexico, and the U.S. The directors select the content that is taught and performed. One genre they play are *sones y jarabes* from Oaxaca, which are regional songs that often accompany folklore dances. This genre is salient to Indigenous people from Oaxaca and their style and presentation can vary based on their diverse geography. The band also plays popular songs from non-Oaxacan Mexican and U.S. based songs, such as the "Happy Birthday" song. In this learning community, Indigenous youth have the opportunity to play musical content that transcends borders and is impactful to their transnational identity development.

The youth are not only learning a variety of genres; their directors teach them foundational technique. The band members learn music through *solfeo*, a music training method used in the pueblo, that reviews volume, tones, and scales while individuals learn to read music. *Solfeo* is primarily taught in Spanish, however, English is used at various points. Since the youth engage with practices that originate from the pueblo, these experiences provide youth opportunities to explore their sense of belonging. For instance, Pablo, a co-founder of the band, explained to the youth that an elderly composer from their pueblo gifted original songs to Banda Oaxaqueña. Pablo shared how there are "gente que los quiere„[7] and want to support them in their efforts to maintain their music and cultural traditions.

Discussion

Banda Oaxaqueña provides youth and adults opportunities to engage with their family and peers from their ancestral pueblo. They actively teach musical content native to their region and genres that are connected to their traditional practices. Band members not only learn content related to their cultural backgrounds, they learn it with their family and community through Indigenous heritage saberes (Urrieta, 2013). Banda Oaxaqueña's learning community is the enactment of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and cultural ways of learning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In contrast to middle class European families, Indigenous families and communities structure opportunities for learning in the cultural practices they teach to their youth (Rogoff, 2014). Middle class families tend to supplement their children's education with extracurricular activities that are not always focused on their cultural backgrounds or community (Chin & Phillips, 2004). In recent decades, scholars have advocated for the inclusion of cultural knowledge from youth's homes and communities into formal schooling (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). While researchers advocate for these pedagogies to be used in classroom settings, Indigenous communities continue to create learning communities of their own.

Study 3

Similar to Study 2, this study examined the inter-generational community context of learning for Yucatec-Maya youth. Students must learn to navigate the different contexts and cultures found at home and at school (Pentón Herrera, 2019b). Ethnic community networks provide a support system for Yucatec-Maya immigrants as they balance the preservation of their home cultures and the integration into their school cultures (Prelat & Maciel, 2007). Hometown Associations (HTAs) serve multiple roles including social networking, support in adapting to the U.S. (e.g., English classes), political influence and fundraising for low-scale development in their pueblos (Orozco & Garcia-Zanello, 2009; Ramakrishnan & Viramontes, 2010). They also act as support systems for coping with discriminatory experiences faced by Indigenous communities in the U.S. (Popkin, 1999). In particular, CLI theory exposes the importance of Indigenous community networks in connecting Indigenous Latinx communities in diasporic contexts and sustaining their cultural practices (Blackwell et al.,

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[7]People that like us.

2017). Although there have been studies about HTAs' and cultural organizations supporting adults (Castillo-Cocom, 2005; Popkin, 1999), more research is needed on the role these organizations take in supporting youth. This study examined the role of the U.S. HTAs and Mexican cultural organizations as decolonial spaces of cultural knowledge mobilization that blur geographical and cultural borders of Indigeneity for Yucatec-Maya youth, while fostering their sense of belonging and identity development.

Method

Participants and setting

The first author, a Yucatec-Maya woman, conducted observations at two Hometown Associations in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California. The HTAs provided citizenship workshops for the community, represented the Maya culture at multicultural events, had various adult support groups, provided Maya language courses for youth in the summer, and had *jarana*, folkloric dance groups, for adults and youth. In Yucatan, Mexico, the first author observed CulturaMaya, an organization funded by the state government to aid Indigenous persons of Mexico. Organizations like CulturaMaya, however, have been criticized for using a top-down approach to eliminate systemic oppression toward Mexican Indigenous peoples without the input of the Indigenous communities (Castillo-Cocom, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Yucatec-Maya youth: 10 (seven males) living in the U.S., and 20 (11 males) living in Yucatan, Mexico. Interviews were conducted with the CulturaMaya youth program coordinators, the CulturaMaya director of migration services, and three HTA program coordinators in California.

Procedures

The third author recruited the youth through schools and HTAs in California and through rural schools and cultural organizations in Mexico. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the schools and cultural organizations at times convenient for the youths. The youth interview protocol explored their views on culture, identity, school, discrimination against them, family, peers, and community. The staff interview protocol included questions about youth programming, Indigenous culture and language, and transnational networking. The first author conducted ethnographic observations across three organizations. The author spent two months in a Yucatec-Maya town and traveled to the CulturaMaya offices to attend youth programming. Similarly, the author spent six months observing the San Francisco HTA on a weekly basis, and two months as a participant-observer in the Los Angeles HTA.

Analysis

Grounded theory open-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to analyze semi-structured youth interviews, cultural organization staff interviews, and observation field-notes. Relevant raw text was coded then repeating ideas were coded and organized into significant themes in which theoretical constructs regarding the topics emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes for the staff interviews were developed separately from the youth interviews. The coding process for both sets of interviews centered on examining how cultural organizations serve as decolonial spaces where Indigenous cultural practices and learning fosters opportunities for Yucatec Maya youth to develop their Indigenous identities, agency, and sense of belonging. Afterward, the codebooks for both interviews were used to code the fieldnotes. Field-notes were triangulated with interview themes.

Results

The data revealed two themes about Indigenous cultural practices and learning in the organizations. The first theme focuses on the role cultural learning plays in the development of transnational

Indigenous identities. The second theme highlights the staff desires for more youth-centered cultural programming.

Informal cultural learning and transnational Indigenous identities

Both HTAs and the Mexican cultural organization promoted a strengths-based approach combined with resources for the youth to develop healthy identities in the various contexts of their lived experiences. Six of ten Yucatec Maya youths in the U.S. stated that they participated in programs such as jarana dance classes to learn more about the Maya identity. U.S. youth reclaimed their Indigeneity through the saberes and practices they were exposed to in these youth programs. The students had a keen awareness of the agency they had to define their Maya identities as transnational through the links made within the HTAs. Several U.S. students mentioned the yearly *vaqueria* or traditional dance, music, and food festival, in which bands and dance groups from Yucatan travel to the U.S. to perform. This festival draws in hundreds of Yucatec-Mayas and their children across California. The *vaqueria* provided insight into the cross-generational participation and community building that HTAs foster. The same type of festival also occurs in the Yucatec-Maya towns, blurring the borders between the U.S. and Mexico and creating a collective sense of cultural knowledge (Blackwell et al., 2017). Students felt the HTA organizations allowed them to gather and organize to learn more about their Indigenous cultural practices. One student stated:

> In order to not lose the Mayan culture in whatever state [place] you might be, and if there are more than three or four people from the same culture which is Maya, try to form groups, meetings or something to be able to interact with more Yucatec people. People will start coming together and trying to make the ideas [cultural knowledge] known.

The Yucatec-Maya youth still in Yucatan felt that the responsibility of preserving the culture should be placed on the government through social institutions like school; like making the curricula in all the public schools inclusive of Maya language classes. One participant stated:

> Well I believe that apart from creating more awareness about the history and culture through education and in general, in the same manner it might be good for the education to become bilingual in the sense that the children that speak Spanish can learn Maya, and the children that speak Maya can learn Spanish.

The participants in Yucatan explained that having more cultural organizations or expanding existing ones to more areas of the state would help them develop their Maya identity.

Staff reflections on opportunities for youth

The importance of cultural organizations supporting the development of Indigenous identities is triangulated with the staff interviews. The HTA staff revealed that most of the services they provide were for adults. The youth-specific activities were the dance groups and summer language classes. The staff had concerns with finding funding sources and increasing outreach to youth. In particular, the influence of gang culture on Maya boys was something the organization wanted to address. One program coordinator stated that he had known several Maya boys that had been recruited to gangs and had either been imprisoned or deported. The boys' unique intersectional experiences with being discriminated against at higher rates than the girls was an issue that the organization planned to address with the formation of a young men's *consejos*, or advising, circle.

CulturaMaya provided more services to youth, but they were trying to expand language classes in rural towns; connect with Maya youth through technology; and create leadership groups run by Maya youth. A goal of the coordinators was to increase understanding of the diversity of urban and rural Maya youth. The CulturaMaya staff discussed the vulnerability of the organization, due to their direct tie to political parties. One way they considered addressing this vulnerability was building infrastructures run by youth to assure continuity if the organization was defunded. Unlike the U.S. staff, the CulturaMaya coordinators wanted to focus on the inequity and explicit sexism faced by Maya girls.

Discussion

These findings expose the necessary support that cultural organizations provide to youth as they navigate their Indigenous identities. For the youth in both nations, importance is placed on preserving their Maya culture and on having cultural organizations as a space to foster their Indigenous culture. Cultural organizations must also create and expand youth programming that addresses specific needs for youths such as keeping them out of gangs, coping with discrimination against them, promoting civic-engagement, and expanding Maya language classes. The fluidity and flexibility of their Maya identity reflects an Indigenous culture that is dynamic, malleable, and constantly changing in order to persevere in the contemporary world and into the future (Urrieta & Calderón, 2019).

General discussion

The three studies show that communal cultural practices facilitate learning communities that encourage Mexican Indigenous youth to empower themselves by fostering a sense of belonging, agency, and their Indigeneity. Across the three studies we found that Mexican Indigenous youth and adults recreate their own cultural practices to facilitate learning communities through intergenerational interactions where students and adults interact informally and center on the learning of youth. These three spaces provide opportunities for self-claimed empowerment (Ruiz, 1997) through the development of assets such as leadership and multilingualism. The three learning communities sustained the cultural saberes across diasporic contexts through discussions led by and centered on youth (YPAR); communal learning outside of a classroom context where youth and adults collectively pitch in to learn music as cultural practices (philharmonic band); and youth programming that tie these diasporic communities together transcending borders through dance groups, language classes, and intergenerational events (CulturaMaya and HTAs). Across the three studies, the authors used decolonizing methods to examine the production, transformation, and mobilization of Indigenous knowledge systems that make these learning communities invaluable spaces for the sustainment of Indigenous culture.

In the first study, we found that when students were invisible within the established structures of the school, it created physical and verbal violence against their bodies (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). The YPAR project provided a space for Triqui students to use their cultural and linguistic knowledge to teach their teachers about their culture as they lack knowledge of the diversity among Latinx/Mexican students. Current educational structures do not acknowledge the rich cultural and family knowledge students bring to schools and classrooms, yet students' Indigeneity persists despite structures that oppress them (Urrieta & Calderón, 2019). Unlike the other two studies, this research was conducted within the school context. The study demonstrated that even within the confines of hostile and sometimes violent school settings, Indigenous students can center on their Indigeneity and forge a sense of belonging.

As opposed to the first study, the second study focused on a learning context outside of school and showed that communities and families hold important diasporic knowledge systems that are not always substantially represented in scholarship and classrooms. These different ways of learning, in this case of Oaxacan students, should be seen as new strategies for studying development and socialization in minoritized groups (Greenfield & Cocking, 2014). Banda Oaxaqueña is an example of how Mexican Indigenous families organize their forms of socialization and extend them within their communities, despite facing various forms of marginalization which make cultural knowledge maintenance especially difficult in the U.S. (Barillas-Chón, 2010). Within their cultural socialization, they provide opportunities for their youth to develop important skills such as multilingualism and intergenerational collaboration (Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016; Rogoff, 2014). Furthermore, the youth engaged with their community's saberes, which afforded them valuable smartness that expand opportunities for academic learning, as well as social and cultural competencies (Urrieta, 2016).

Similar to Study 2, Study 3 examines how ethnic community networks provide a support system and learning space for the Yucatec-Maya students as they balance the preservation of their Indigenous culture at home and the integration into their school culture (Casanova, 2016; Pentón Herrera, 2019b; Prelat & Maciel, 2007). However, in this last study, the focus shifted to the transnational community organizations' role in designing learning communities for Mexican Indigenous students. These community organizations, such as HTAs in the U.S. and cultural organizations in Mexico, can serve as vehicles for informal cultural knowledge mobilization across generations of Indigenous youth and their families. For the youth in both nations, it was clearly important to preserve their Maya identity and expand the support of cultural organizations for them to [re]learn the language and have a space to belong.

Across the three studies we see that whether within a school club, a formal organized band, or more informal programming across nations, these spaces provide a place in which cultural learning is rooted in a collective cultural consciousness of being Indigenous. This collective consciousness is found in different geographical, social, or psychological contexts. We also found that the learning that happens in these communities, beyond supporting the students in their development of assets, can and should be shared with practitioners and educators working with these populations. Special consideration should be given to the multilingual assets these youth and communities possess, as these studies demonstrate how these communicative means afford youth an opportunity to learn about their Indigenous heritage, and its important implications.

Limitations and future directions

Our studies should be interpreted within the context of limitations that raise directions for future research. First, our findings are attributed to particular Mexican Indigenous populations (Triqui, Zapoteco, and Yucatec-Maya) and may not apply to all Mexican and Latinx Indigenous youth. Future studies should expand on our studies through the incorporation of larger sample sizes and by conducting surveys with the students and the adults that are facilitating these learning communities. Second, our studies center on Mexican Indigenous students' development of assets in their Indigenous communities which can be transferable to other learning spaces such as classrooms, but do not examine how these assets are applied to their academic outcomes. Future studies could collect data to assess the influence of assets developed in Indigenous learning communities on the students' academic performance. Future studies can also focus on collecting data on the impact of sharing these different ways of learning with teachers and administrators in schools that serve these Mexican Indigenous students.

Conclusion & recommendations

The rich diversity among Mexican Indigenous students contributes to the scholarship on immigrant education, bilingual instruction, and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Urrieta, Mesinas, & Martínez, 2019) that can support educators and practitioners in embracing the strengths that these students bring to the classrooms and other learning spaces. It is important for educators to learn more about the students they served. Without acknowledging students' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, it makes them invisible.

Some actions teachers can take to include Mexican Indigenous students is to ask about all the languages they are exposed to at home and in their communities, allow students to have more agency in their learning experiences, and ask them what other forms of knowledge they have learned outside of school. In line with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014), public schooling needs to include the diverse histories, cultures, and knowledge systems of their Indigenous students in order to provide a holistic and responsible education.

We recommend that cultural organizations incorporate more youth program offerings in these Indigenous communities. These youth programs could include more heritage saberes and practices

(e.g., weaving therapy for youth) and expand the summer Indigenous language classes through partnerships with schools that have large Mexican Indigenous student populations. Our studies show the importance of cultural communities for Mexican Indigenous youths' learning and contribute to critical conversations about educational equity for these students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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