

Mexican Intercultural Education in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic ¹

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The COVID-19 pandemic that since January has been battering different regions, countries and continents has not only paralyzed much of the world's economic activities, but it has also made an impact on the educational work of schools and families, teachers and communities. Since their nineteenth-century western origins, schools have been conservative factories that aspired to produce homogeneous citizens, and their educational action was always based on the principle of face-to-face education and classroom interaction. An endless number of studies has shown that this factory of supposed equality has been, since its creation, a faithful reproducer of the existing inequalities in the social environment of its students.

While in other instances the school legitimizes educational failures and dropouts of students who are culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically more distant from the supposed mainstream school culture, holding responsible the pre-existing social inequalities, now due to the pandemic we are able to see, to live and to suffer what happens when the school runs away from its students, what happens when it is not the students who quit, but the school itself. The massive and sudden closure of schools throughout entire countries contributes to deepening the previously existing inequalities, which is further increased when these inequalities coincide with cultural, ethnic or linguistic diversities, as in the case of the indigenous people and communities of African descent in Latin America (Cortina, 2014).

In what follows we will try to sketch - in a preliminary and surely premature way - the effects of the pandemic on indigenous children and teenagers in Veracruz, Mexico, who are being affected by the closure of their schools – schools who are part of a public network of intercultural and bilingual education for indigenous students, conceived by the Mexican nation-state with the aim of including an intercultural approach and of taking advantage of the diversity of diversities as a learning resource. After describing the negative impacts the COVID-19 pandemic is having on these children and youngsters, we will briefly outline some positive long-term effects the pandemic and school closure crisis may have on the future of intercultural education in Veracruz and Mexico.

¹ Translated from Spanish by Margarita Alcántara Alemán and Beatriz Suárez Méndez.

Deschooling indigenous youth in Veracruz

In Veracruz, as in the rest of Mexico, there is a subsystem of so-called intercultural and bilingual education for indigenous people made up of preschool and primary schools located in rural and indigenous regions that use both native languages and Spanish as means of instruction (Dietz and Mateos Cortés, 2013). These schools were originally conceived by centralist and vertical *indigenismo* policies of the Mexican state to hispanicize and acculturate indigenous students in order to “integrate” them into a monoculturally and monolingually conceived Mexican society. This legacy, although officially substituted by the contemporary notion of a multicultural and plurilingual Mexico, is still reflected in the application of subtractive or transitional bilingualism strategies which prepare students bilingually in their first school years to transit from a bilingual primary to a monolingual Spanish secondary education, where they no longer “need” their mother tongue to study higher education levels. Accordingly, in secondary education there is no bilingual subsystem; instead, in some regions with stronger ethnic claims making, isolated subjects on “Regional language and culture” are offered, while the rest of the classes follow the national school curriculum, a curriculum that in Mexico is still strongly centralized by the federal Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP*), which applies national parameters and official textbooks.

In mid March 2020, as the health authorities imposed the closure of every school institution in Mexico, the SEP came up with an ambitious distance-learning program, called “Learn at Home” (*Aprende en Casa*; cf. <https://www.aprendeencasa.mx/aprende-en-casa/acceso.html>), which was designed and developed from Mexico City and was streamed through internet, transmitted through public television and in some cases broadcasted by the few public radio stations existing in the country. The program, which was obviously developed in a short timespan as an emergency action, managed to provide some audiovisual resources to complement the official textbook so that children, along with their parents, in their homes could receive lessons organized by the traditional subjects of the national curriculum and carry out tasks that would then form part of a so-called “folder of experiences” assembled individually by each child.

As Kalman (2020) illustrates in detail, this program implies a step backward and a return to pedagogical strategies of memorization, to a conventional curriculum fragmented into subjects, to decontextualized notions of learning and to regaining the central importance of the textbook - all

of them are elements that the so-called "New Mexican School" (SEP-SEB, 2019), the educational model of the current, center-left federal government aimed to abolish and to replace by a new notion of school founded on meaningful learning, on the centrality of the learners as educational subjects and on the redefinition and re-professionalization of teachers, who were supposed to stop acting as one-way knowledge brokers of textbooks, but who would now act as creative mediators and facilitators of different learning experiences that include local knowledges and who promote dialogues of academic as well as lifeworld knowledges.

"Learn at Home", evaluated at the end of the March through June term by SEP as a successful program with regard to its coverage and monitoring numbers, has not only meant a backlash by reinstalling school centralism through central national textbooks as only valid source of knowledge, but for millions of indigenous students it has also meant a complete return to monolingualism in Spanish: only few television or radio programs in Veracruz eventually included some short segment in Nahuatl, Tutunakú or in another indigenous language of Veracruz, but when doing so the indigenous language was conceived again as an isolated school subject, as an object of study and it was not used as means of daily academic communication. Apparently, the situation is not very different from other indigenous regions of Mexico, as an overview by Gallardo Gutiérrez (2020) reveals.

This backlash affects the still weak bridges that were being built between the intercultural and bilingual public school and the local communities: all community links and exchanges that throughout the last years had been slowly, but efficiently developed and promoted by the indigenous bilingual teachers in the Huasteca, in the Totonacapan, in the highlands of Zongolica and in southern region of the Sierra de Santa Martha, the four main indigenous regions in Veracruz, suddenly disappeared from the educational agenda. The complex and innovative translation processes between academic knowledge and the community knowledge with which the intercultural education subsystem in Veracruz has been experimenting and innovating in the last few years just disappeared from the official educational priorities, now focused solely on "making ends meet" and on prioritizing the "learning outcomes" of the national curriculum.

Besides these setbacks, whose long-term impact on bilingual youth's learning processes will yet have to be assessed, the choice of distance-learning has once again disempowered the central figure of educational innovations – the role of the intercultural bilingual teacher. During the pandemic

programs such as "Learn at home" have de facto sent the message to households that parents could and should replace the role of the teacher – a process of teacher disempowerment which is rooted in neoliberal educational reforms that suggest that “everyone can be a teacher”. Therefore, once the peak of the pandemic is over, the Mexican school system will have to reinvent a coherent role model of its teacher, which right now is completely inconsistent and contradictory to its supposedly “New Mexican School” discourse.

Apart from these effects, there is a strong concern about the underlying monocultural and urban-centric bias of the actions taken by educational policies in times of pandemic. Both the federal health authorities with their slogan "Stay at home" (*Quédate en casa*) and the educational authorities with its corollary "Learn at home" (*Aprende en casa*) reflect a middle-class image of “home”, of an often imaginary domestic unit which ignores not only the diversity of culturally specific rural, suburban, semiurban and urban residence patterns, but also the great inequality prevailing in the access to internet as well as to the physical infrastructure of study spaces at home (Pérez Hernández & Gaitán Rossi, 2020).

In several regions of Veracruz , as also happens in other Mexican states (Lemus Jiménez et al., 2020; Ojarasca, 2020), indigenous communities reacted to the pandemic in culture specific ways, not by passively confining themselves to individualized, fragmented domestic units, but by closing off all access to their community as a whole, so as to remain not at home, but in their community. These bottom-up local strategies, which the communities even managed to impose on their own local neighbors who were trying to return home after losing their jobs in urban or tourist areas, in order to limit the danger of infection that these temporary migrations implied, have not been perceived or taken advantage of by the educational authorities. As a consequence, intercultural educational strategies to promote “learning inside my community” to complement the official to-down strategy of “Learn at home” were not considered at all.

Despite this neglect, in the intercultural education subsystem for indigenous students of Veracruz there have been impressive examples of teachers who have done their best to maintain contact with their pupils through personal visits, individual phone calls, messages through local community radios or by WhatsApp messages (where available) for parents. However, at most with these efforts it was possible to diversify some teaching materials that were delivered to complement the

textbook or the "Learn at home" program, but the teachers could hardly really promote or accompany their pupils' learning processes.

Considering the devastating economic impact of the pandemic, we are aware that many children and teenagers were unable to engage in their distance learning classes as they were busy supporting their parents in peasant subsistence activities on the fields or in local informal trade. It remains to be evaluated how many of these indigenous youngsters will be able to return later on the already existing gap between school and community has been further deepened.

The need to transform schools and school-community relations

All these negative consequences have put into question the continuity of an intercultural and inclusive approach to Mexican and Veracruz public education, which has taken troubling steps back towards a monocultural, linguistically biased, excluding and discriminatory educational model. Educational policy seems to imply that the use of diversity, of intercultural learning and of local knowledge as well as the much needed transformation of the school institution into a community of inclusive learning are "luxuries" that cannot be maintained in times of pandemic. However, we consider that once the pandemic times has turned into a "new normality", it is even more pressing to insist on the need to interculturalize the school, any school, which will have to go through a deep process of institutional transformation in order to survive, to recover its legitimacy and to maintain its meaning in the face of the realities of diversity and inequality that communities, their children and youth are experiencing.

Among the positive aspects the forced deschooling brought, we highlight the new role of households and the still only implicit - recognition of the importance of intergenerational dialogues and peer processes for children and youngsters' learning processes. Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and grandparents must finally be recognized as key subjects of these learning processes in the new scenarios of "hybrid models" (Barrón Tirado, 2020) that in the future will combine moments of face-to-face teaching with other distant learning moments. And together with the domestic units, the communities themselves will also have to be recognized as educational subjects, which during the pandemic have been gathering a huge amount of experiential learning. These concrete experiences are in fact applications of the project method and of cooperative learning, methods widely defended by intercultural and inclusive education.

The community service aspect of schools and their relationship with the territory not only as a context, but also as a “text” providing meaningful learning have long been claimed by intercultural education as central axes that help to rethink, to reinvent and to transform the school inductively, “from below”. In our “back to normal” future, a future that will be shaped by intermittent pandemics, it is completely out of date and dysfunctional to continue to view school as the last link in a vertical, hierarchical and monocultural chain of command. In each region and locality, urban as well as local, the school has to be redesigned both in its closed and - particularly in times of COVID-19 - in its open spaces, in its classroom and its community moments, in school calendars, in the temporary organization of the group shifts and turns, in the sizes of the student groups and in the distinction and/or combination of their levels, as is already practiced in so-called “multigrade schools”, in which teachers attend different grades simultaneously (Juárez Bolaños, 2016). The flexibility of this educational modality, often stigmatized by the urban-centric vision that prefers large complete schools, makes multigrade education a pioneer for the necessary changes in every school ².

In order to generate and consolidate these processes of transformation the school institution needs, centrally imposed decrees will no longer work, as well as the guide documents and the evaluation portfolios imposed by the ministry’s offices through supervisions and headquarters, until they vertically are imposed on the school head masters, reflecting the outdated Taylorist model of school administration. Much more decisive, both for the students’ successful learning processes and for the health security of every school, will now be closely knit school-community or neighborhood alliances, as well as synergies between the school community, the community authorities and the local health entities. In indigenous regions of Veracruz, these entities include both “official,” governmental rural health services and indigenous customary health authorities, such as traditional doctors, healers and midwives. We should not forget that in Latin America indigenous people have been for centuries and still are key actors in resilience and resistance to different waves of catastrophic historical pandemics; as survivors, they can therefore turn to their “biocultural memory” (Toledo and Barrera Bassols, 2008) when facing the contemporary pandemic.

² In Mexico such multigrade schools are not an isolated exception: about 44% of all public primary schools in the country are multigrade schools (Schmelkes and Águila, 2019).

Final remarks

When the pandemic has not even reached its peak in Mexico, current government plans are based on the – in our opinion illusionary - idea of gradually recovering full attendance by returning to the pre-pandemic school. The recommended strategy "Back to school in the new normal" that SEP has just elaborated foresees a regionally staggered reopening of the schools; again, however, the decisions in this regard are not devolved to the school communities or to local authorities, but they will be taken centrally and far away by the federal and state health authorities. This strategy includes sanitary filters and space modifications, which in some cases are impossible due to infrastructural limitations, but it does not question the conventional operation of the educational institution.

Instead of such a “re-normalizing” approach, instead of promising normality with no ifs or buts, the upcoming 2020-2021 school year should be conceived by all actors as the beginning of a slow and long process of educational experimentation and innovation from below, something that the intercultural approach always proposes and defends. However, this margin of maneuver and autonomy must be conquered and obtained in negotiations that are only beginning to emerge. Unfortunately, in Veracruz, but also in the rest of the country, it seems that the pandemic has re-empowered centralized instances of educational, health and political decisions in general. This will pose very specific challenges that rural, but also urban, schools in Veracruz will soon face.

In the indigenous bilingual teaching profession in Veracruz, important initiatives to generate educational projects from below in favor of indigenous people and their communities have already been started before the pandemic, such as the current *Proyecto educativo indígena para Veracruz* (cf. <https://elmanifiesto.com.mx/2019/10/02/proyecto-pedagogico-en-veracruz-desnuda-la-educacion-indigena/>); it emerged some months before the pandemic from the teachers' movement itself through a process of local and regional consultation and analysis that teachers carry out on the limits as well as the achievements of intercultural and bilingual indigenous education, in order to design and exchange alternatives experienced from below, through grassroots networks of teachers and schools. Both teachers and educational researchers, we must defend these innovations and intercultural transformations in order to reverse the hegemonic monocultural and monolingual backlash affecting intercultural schools in Veracruz and Mexican schools.

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