

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND SCHOOLING IN MEXICO: A FULBRIGHT ALUMNAE COLLABORATION

LESLIE ANN LOCKE AND MAIKA DORANTES

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic forced Fulbrighters across the globe to return to their home countries. The Fulbright alumnae featured here were in the midst of their Fulbright experiences in March of 2020 when such decisions were made. After return to their countries, Locke–Garcia-Robles Scholar (Mexico), and Dorantes–Hubert Humphrey Fellow (US), crossed paths through service as panelists for Fulbright interviewees. They later collaborated on a Fulbright-inspired but independent research project specific to public schooling in Mexico. Steeped in this collaboration, they examined the Indigenous language policy for public schools in Mexico and highlight its practice in schools in the Yucatán. They trouble this policy and practice as a natural resource—that is, the conservation and promotion of Indigenous language as a culturally-validating and sustaining natural human resource and a means for a sustainable future.



Keywords: indigenous education • educational policy • Mexico

We are Fulbright alumnae. Leslie was a Fulbright Garcia-Robles Scholar (2019-20) at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán in Mérida, Mexico. Maika was a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow (2019-20) at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee in the US. Leslie's Fulbright project was focused on public schooling in Mérida, specifically gathering the perspectives and experiences of teachers in public schools regarding their teaching. Maika's Fulbright project also centered on public schooling, specifically related to understanding public school teachers' social and emotional competence and their students' social and emotional learning across the Yucatán state of Mexico.

However, because the Covid-19 pandemic forced Fulbrighters across the globe to return to their home countries in March 2020, our projects were cut short. Leslie's project was most significantly impacted as she had arrived in Mexico only in January 2020. Data collection for her project had not yet started when she had to leave. Maika's project began in person in the fall of 2019 while she was at Vanderbilt University, and then shifted online after March 2020. A key outcome of her project was teachers' acknowledgment of the intrinsic link between emotional balance and creating conducive learning environments, thereby decreasing discipline issues and building peaceful, safe, and healthy classroom spaces.

While we did not meet during our Fulbright experiences, our paths crossed as we both served as panelists for Fulbright applications and interviews. As education scholars and practitioners, we found a common interest and passion, and began communicating regularly about public education in both Mexico and the US. Eventually we collaborated on a study of public schooling in the Yucatán region of Mexico, specifically in Mérida. Important to this collaboration is that Maika is from Mérida and served there as a Supervisor with the Yucatán Secretariat of Public Education for seven years. One outcome of our work together is an interrogation of Mexico's Indigenous language policy which affects public schools across the country. Here we discuss the Indigenous language policy and highlight two bilingual (maaya [the Yucatec Maya language] and Spanish) schools in the state of Yucatán. We are specifically interested in how this policy as well as the practice of Indigenous language learning could be a natural resource. In other words, viewing the conservation and promotion of Indigenous language as a culturally-validating and sustaining natural human resource and a means for a sustainable future.

EDUCATION IN MEXICO

In Mexico, educación básica or public basic education includes preescolar/preschool (3 years), primaria/primary (6 years, grades 1-6), secundaria/secondary (3 years, grades 7-9), and preparatoria/upper secondary (3 years, grades 10-12). Each of these levels is compulsory. Public schools across the country are the charge of the Secretaría de Educación Pública or the Ministry of Public Education located in Mexico City. The curriculum at all levels that schools must follow is centralized and established by the Ministry. This includes curricula related to Indigenous education. Public schools have little autonomy as the decision-making processes are regulated by national policy.

National policy, alongside the Mexican Constitution, prohibits discrimination based on several grounds, including those related to national or ethnic origin. It recognizes Indigenous peoples' collective right to "preserve and enrich the languages, knowledge and all the elements that constitute their culture and identity" (Article 2 Section A.IV) and to communicate in their own languages without restriction. There is also a law specific to Indigenous peoples' languages, the Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas. This law stipulates that Indigenous languages are national languages, and that the State will recognize, protect, and promote the preservation, development and use of national Indigenous languages. Important for schools, this law confirms individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples and communities, such as access to compulsory education that is bilingual and intercultural. It also establishes the government's duty to take positive and compensatory measures to promote equality of opportunities for Indigenous populations such as bilingual education programs that promote

cultural interchange, scholarships to promote alphabetization, education at all levels, and vocational training. Last, it stipulates that Indigenous peoples and communities can be co-responsible for the implementation of the objectives of this law and active participants in the use and teaching of their languages.

In simple terms, the government recognizes Indigenous languages as national languages, at the same level as Spanish. It further mandates that Indigenous students have access to compulsory education in their own language and in Spanish. Mexico's General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, specifically, is a measure aimed at improving educational opportunities for Mexico's diverse Indigenous populations who

continue to experience poverty, low rates of literacy, and limited educational opportunity. This law gives Mexico's Indigenous students the right to teachers who both write and speak the language of their community. It also requires Mexico's teacher education institutions to establish programs in Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) and to include Indigenous cultures and languages in the curriculum. This is the largest public school campaign centered on Indigenous languages and cultures in the Americas. We see this legislation as a potential means toward a sustainable future (sustaining Indigenous languages) for Mexican youth. Moreover, it is a systemic approach to honoring the histories and cultures of families and communities who have been marginalized. Schools that center Indigenous languages and cultures provide spaces of belonging for students, families, and communities, thereby increasing and enhancing student learning outcomes.

There are 68 surviving Indigenous languages spoken in Mexico and Indigenous primary education is offered in 24 of the 31 states across the country. In practice, most of the Indigenous bilingual education in public schools is focused on the preescolar and primaria levels (preK-grade 6). Teachers in Indigenous bilingual programs are to be either native speakers of the Indigenous language offered or have knowledge of the Indigenous language.

However, despite IBE programs centered on bilingual education and Indigenous curricula and pedagogies, Indigenous language teachers may be susceptible to reproducing the text-centric practices they experienced in school. Thus, regardless of decades of scholarly advocacy for ideological understandings of literacy and the development of multiliteracies through which learners engage critically with diverse linguistic and cultural communication, students are often evaluated on a narrow conception of literacy as speedy reading and standardized writing. That is, Indigenous

Schools that center Indigenous languages and cultures provide spaces of belonging for students, families, and communities, thereby increasing and enhancing student learning outcomes

people's belief systems and knowledges appear to be largely absent from these programs in practice, with a prominent focus on simplistic linguistic aspects. Many Indigenous populations continue to experience a process of assimilation and language subordination in schools.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND SCHOOLING IN THE YUCATÁN

The Yucatán region is home to one of Mexico's largest Indigenous populations (Mayans) and has one of the highest percentages of Indigenous language speakers. This region encompasses three states—Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán. Within the Yucatán, the multiliteracies of the Maya are often overlooked by schools — despite a law recognizing the linguistic and cultural rights of people. Further, there is no bilingual or intercultural education provided by the state beyond the primaria level. While education at the secundaria level is compulsory, Indigenous students in the Yucatán experience high levels of school incompleteness. Additionally, many schools in the Yucatán, particularly those focused on Indigenous languages, struggle with a lack of qualified teachers and insufficient materials.

In and around Mérida, the capital city of the Yucatán, there are a few schools that use bilingual curricula. Most of them are at the preescolar level, however there are a few at the primaria level. At these levels, educators are to provide sustained bilingualism, which manifests as teaching half the day in the Indigenous language, that is, *maaya*, and half the day in Spanish. A goal of the curricula is for students to appreciate their own culture and acquire a second language, in this case, Spanish.

EXAMPLES OF INDIGENOUS SCHOOLING IN MÉRIDA

The preescolar “Sastal” is located in Acanceh. The student body of this school includes 85 students (over half of students are girls). The students range from 3 to 6 years old and are in pre-k through the third grade. There are four teachers and a principal, all women. Three of the four teachers have a specialization in Indigenous and bilingual education to teach *maaya* and Spanish. While Sastal is an Indigenous school, most of the students communicate in Spanish which is supported by the parents. This is not unusual according to the literature as many parents, while they may speak *maaya* at home with their children, support the school teaching in Spanish, as this is the dominant language of the country and fluency is understood to provide for future opportunities for their children. The principal and teachers at Sastal have been working with parents to communicate and collaborate around the value of teaching in both languages. At Sastal, some of the activities that focus on Indigenous language include reading stories and legends in *maaya* and Spanish; posting signboards around the school with *maaya* translations; dedicating specific time to the teaching and learning of *maaya*; and providing students with board games with *maaya* words (i.e., *loteria*, memory cards).

“Salvador Alvarado” is a large *primaria* located in Seye. Salvador Alvarado serves 389 students (over 50% are girls) in grades 1 through 6. There are 16 teachers, two have specializations in Indigenous languages. Seye has a substantial *maaya*-speaking population (approximately 18% of the community). However, recent generations have become more Spanish-dominant, and concomitantly, the collective knowledge of the rich linguistic and cultural heritage is diminishing. In recognition of this shift, Salvador Alvarado was chosen by the Ministry for an initiative aimed at revitalizing the *maaya* language among children at the *primaria* level. An important component of this innovative program allowed for the *maaya* language to be integrated into the curriculum, with dedicated lessons occurring biweekly. Additionally, a visibility campaign was implemented, showcasing various *maaya* words throughout the school. Beyond the classroom, Salvador Alvarado has engaged the community through fairs and festivals that feature interactive games and activities, and where students have the opportunity to present and share their learning and knowledge of *maaya*.

As part of our collaboration, we conducted an informal interview with Ligia Zobeida, the principal at Sastal who also identifies as Maya. We asked her to reflect on the Indigenous schooling occurring at her school and others in the area. She said, “With my background in Indigenous education and coming from a community rooted in authentic Mayan heritage, I find fulfillment in the opportunity to not only preserve but also enrich our culture and language alongside the minds of our preschoolers.” She continued about one activity that she found particularly powerful:

... a project that particularly resonates with me is the creation of a communal storybook. Collaborating with the teachers, children, and their parents, we compiled an anthology featuring legends, domestic narratives, and oral stories. These serve as conduits to tell the richness of our traditions, intertwining with our everyday activities.

Ligia went on to describe how she feels about her work with Indigenous education, “While it would be nice for our achievements to be more widely acknowledged, to know that we are actively aiding children in preserving their heritage and language fuels our belief in the significance of our daily efforts.”

There are exceptionally dedicated teachers and leaders, like Ligia Zobeida, who support Indigenous schooling. Maika, with seven years of experience as a Supervisor within the Yucatán Secretariat of Public Education, was able to identify many challenges. Specifically, during her tenure she noted that Indigenous schooling was met with enthusiasm among school staff, presenting an opportunity to integrate this knowledge into other subjects. However, even with proficient *maaya* language instructors, Indigenous education suffered for a variety of reasons. One notable challenge was the reluctance of students to engage in conversations in *maaya* within the school setting. Despite their understanding of *maaya*, and it being commonly used

in their homes and with their families, the dynamics shifted within the school environment. The schools struggled with creating buy-in with students that language as cultural heritage was worth preserving. Additionally, although school curricula and activities centered around language development and oral communication, students faced insufficient opportunities to apply these skills with practicability. The schools also experienced a noticeable absence of sustained engagement around Indigenous education programming from the Ministry. This limited local educators' autonomy in decision-making and hindered the execution of their plans due to inadequate support and communication.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Solutions for Indigenous language policy lie with increased community involvement to instill a sense of ownership and pride over schooling to foster a deeper connection between students and their linguistic heritage. Addressing these limitations is crucial for the success of projects aiming to revitalize Indigenous languages within the educational landscape of the Yucatán. The *de jure* recognition by the Mexican government of Indigenous language rights is an important step; however, in practice, schools may operate under a model that continues to marginalize these same languages. The contradictions within the bilingual education movement and reality are stark. That is, despite federal legislation to the contrary, Indigenous children's right to receive education in their native languages largely remains to be granted. While laws and policies are a start, language as a natural human resource will struggle to become a reality without significant dedication and committed change by the Mexican government.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Although we were not able to complete our planned time as a Fulbright Scholar or a Fulbright Fellow due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our experiences with and because of Fulbright have been rewarding and provided collaborative possibilities. Our shared interests in education spurred our Fulbright-inspired but independent collaboration on a project centered on the experiences of teachers in public schools in Mérida, Mexico. One outcome of our collaboration is the current work troubling the Indigenous language policy for public schools in Mexico as a natural human resource. Our Fulbright experiences, while shorter than planned, allowed us to grow as scholars, learn from dedicated educators, students, and community members, and see new educational contexts. It deepened our commitment to education for the public good. We plan to continue our collaboration with future work centered on public schooling in Mexico, the US, and Canada.



Maika Dorantes

BIOGRAPHY

Leslie Ann Locke, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her research, teaching, and service is informed by a desire to understand the barriers students experience in education systems and to broaden access and opportunity for *all* students. She was a Fulbright Garcia-Robles Scholar at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán in Mexico in 2020 where she studied public schools and learned from public school educators. Leslie can be reached at leslie.locke@mnsu.edu

Maika Dorantes is a PhD student in Education at the University of Manitoba, Canada. As a former Supervisor of elementary schools in Yucatán, Mexico, she developed different projects to enhance learning, inclusion, leadership, and social-emotional learning (SEL) within the schools in her charge. She was a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow at Vanderbilt University in 2019, improving her leadership and project development skills. Her current research encompasses inclusion, SEL, and leadership to continue improving educational settings in Mexico, the US, and Canada. Maika can be reached at dorantem@myumanitoba.ca
