

Chapter 3

Undefended Children in the Classroom? Looking at Textbooks, Cultural Difference, and Other Aspects of Indigenous Education in Mexico

Jill R. Gnade-Muñoz

Mexico and other countries of Latin America have recently and officially recognized the “pluricultural” character of their populations. The constitution of Mexico was amended in 1992 to take this reality into account. The educational systems of these countries have been charged with assuring equality and intercultural interaction within the classroom and beyond. In Mexico, the creation of bilingual and intercultural educational programs for Indigenous¹ children began in 1992 and has intensified and grown considerably since then. The landscape of the Chiapas Highlands has changed; colorful cement buildings with bold lettering have popped up in the center of most villages alongside better-adapted wooden homes. Indigenous children are attending schools in higher numbers than they ever have before. What is this experience like for them? Is it possible that Indigenous children of Mexico should be considered culturally undefended and as such vulnerable in the classroom?

The Maya-Tojolabal People

In order to begin to understand what is meant by cultural difference and culturally undefended children in the classroom, it is necessary to take a brief look at what constitutes this difference. To this end, we explored how power and authority are conceptualized by the Maya-Tojolabal culture of Chiapas through the prism of linguistic analysis, emphasizing the intersection between language and culture/worldview.

¹In this chapter, we utilize the term “Indigenous” to describe the autochthones people in Mexico. It does not carry a negative connotation there, unlike the term “indio.”

J.R. Gnade-Muñoz, Ph.D. (✉)
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA
e-mail: jgnade2@unl.edu

The Tojolabal people inhabit the valleys of Independencia and Comitán of Chiapas, Mexico, as well as the forests of Altamirano, La Trinitaria, and Las Margaritas. They make up a small percentage of the more than ten million Indigenous people of Mexico and are the smallest of the four major Mayan cultures of Chiapas: the Tzeltal, the Tzotzil, the Chol, and the Tojolabal. The word *Tojolabal* can be translated into English as “language of truth” or “authentic language.” *Tojol* denotes “straight” or “legitimate,” while *‘ab’al* means “language,” derived from the verb *a’bi*, signifying “to listen” in the Tojolabal language. Thus, *Tojolabal* may also be translated as “language of good listeners” (Lenkersdorf, 1996).

The Tojolabal people constitute an idiosyncratic and unique culture that has survived through active resistance for more than 500 years. Since the “Conquista,” which took place during the sixteenth century in Chiapas, the Tojolabal people have endured colonial or neocolonial conditions. The living memory of this community is marked by deceptions both past and present, but especially during the *baldío* period, which lasted from colonial times until the middle of the twentieth century. The word *baldío* in Spanish means “waste” or “wasteland” in English. During that extensive period of time, many of them were serfs or slaves and labored under the absolute authoritarian rule of the *patron*, the hacienda owner. In those times, the Tojolabal people worked from sun up to sun down, without rights or pay, earning only tokens valid exclusively at the store of the hacienda, which was owned and operated by the *patron*. Thus, the majority of them soon became indebted and enslaved for life to the hacienda. On the community level, five community elders were charged with solving small disputes. Meanwhile, the authority over the land, or “our mother land” for the Tojolabal people, fell solely to the arbitrary judgment of the *patron* landowner (Lenkersdorf, 1996).

Centuries later, agrarian reform brought about after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 broke the *baldío* system and, thus, gave new hope to the Tojolabal people, facilitating the recovery of certain autonomy. The redistribution of land in Chiapas took place during the 1950s and 1960s, when small *ejidos*, or land parcels, were formed to the benefit of the Tojolabal people.

Sak K’inál Tajaltik, a Tojolabal author and poet, described this pivotal event:

Our parents and grandparents were slaves. However, later national lands were redistributed, and so, we came one step closer to a just society, to freedom. Perhaps our ancestors felt happiness in their hearts when this step was taken. (Tajaltik & Lenkersdorf, 2001, p. VI)

Tajaltik continued by explaining the process that led to what today is called a system of “obeying authority.” He asserted that after the decline of the *baldío* system, the Tojolabal culture began a gradual change from vertical to horizontal or circular authority, including extreme accountability of authority figures to the community as a whole. The community leaders gradually earned respect by organizing fiestas, pilgrimages, and collective work. Thus, the monopoly on power and decision-making passed from the hands of one leader to those of the entire community, to “all of us” (Tajaltik & Lenkersdorf, 2001).

Language and Culture

Within the Tojolabal language, we find evidence of this horizontal authority. What can language structure tell us? Depending on how different peoples perceive reality, they name or define it. The organization of reality depends on this “naming.” Language is the vehicle for the said organization, and within the language structure of a given culture or language group, information may be gleaned about priorities and societal organization. We suggest, therefore, that language and culture are strongly linked and that by taking a closer look at the linguistic structure of the Tojolabal language, we may find clues about why the authoritarian classroom environment is incompatible with the Tojolabal worldview.

In the structure of Tojolabal culture, we find several distinctive elements not found in Indo-European languages like English or Spanish. The most important of these differences is the nonexistence of objects, direct or indirect, and, consequently, a lack of objectification and subordination. There are only subjects who communicate on a level playing field.

An example of this absence of objects can be seen in the following example:

English	Tojolabal
I told you.	I told. You listened.

(Lenkersdorf, 1996, p. 30)

This phrase in Tojolabal illustrates how the object disappears and a dual structure emerges. In it, two subjects (I and you) are carrying out equally important functions. “I told ... you listened.” In other words, if you are not listening, I, in reality, didn’t tell “you” anything. The Tojolabal language requires two distinctive phrases with two verbs to convey this idea. On the other hand, the phrase in English contains a direct object pronoun, which is subordinate. This object does not carry out as important a function nor is it a subject of action. The “intersubjectivity” of the Tojolabal language enters into contradiction with the subordination in English or Spanish and illustrates a distinctive view of the same reality. In other words, the same reality is perceived in different ways by different individuals and cultures.

The Concept of Authority

Ja ma’ ‘ay ja’tel kujtiki mandar ‘ay kujtik. Translation: The government, which has been chosen by us, has to obey us.

This phrase is representative of the Tojolabal worldview and demonstrates what being an authority figure means to the Tojolabal people: a community servant who simply carries out the wishes of the collective. In this context of “obeying authority,” power hierarchies have little or no place, which makes the presence of a teacher, an outsider who arrives to take a power position, so problematic. We also observed that in this language there exists no concept or translation for the verb “to order” or “to command,” rendering it necessary to borrow from the Spanish and

to utilize the verb *mandar*. In a classroom, however, discipline and order are of utmost importance, and power is concentrated in the hands of only one agent, the teacher, who commands, orders, and disciplines the students.

By contrast, power is distributed horizontally in a Tojolabal community and depends on a total consensus of all involved. There is no above or below, no asymmetrical power relation. Thus, all members of the community have the same clout when it comes to decision-making. Consensus and unanimity are mandatory, and any “authority” figure is subjugated to the desires of all of “us.” In order to assure that all are on board, often the least committed or most marginalized of the community is elected leader so that he/she is obliged to commit. To be present at an assembly meeting in a Tojolabal community is fascinating, because all present speak in unison, and when the voices die down, one person, usually an elder, summarizes the opinions and thoughts of everyone involved. This phenomenon attests to the definition of Tojolabal as people who know how to listen. Do teachers and school officials or government representatives know how to listen to the Tojolabal people? Can Indigenous children be considered subjects of action within an authoritarian classroom setting? This brief discussion of the concept of authority of the Maya-Tojolabal people gave us a basis for further deepening our study of how it is that Indigenous children may be considered undefended in a classroom setting.

Incompatible Concepts of Education

Horizontal power relations are also apparent in child-rearing practices of the Tojolabal culture as well as other Indigenous cultures of Mexico. Anthropologist Chamoux explains:

Indigenous people apparently do not consider direct repression a valid disciplinary technique for use in the process of socialization or education. [...] One common characteristic found during the three stages of socialization—early infancy, infancy, and preadolescence—is the extreme rarity of an authoritarian tone used with children. A militant tone, so common in a school system and classroom setting, as well as within the mainstream *mestizo* family structure, is almost completely absent among Indigenous peoples. It is totally absent during early infancy and is an exception—looked upon very poorly—in the later stages. The same can be said for verbal violence and insults. All in all, the typical tone and conduct of the instructor-student relationship is the exact opposite of what prevails in a classroom and in mainstream culture (Chamoux, 1992, p. 79).

Children are, therefore, considered subjects from birth and are not “subordinated” or subjugated. Because of this, their first encounter with a classroom setting can result in a chaotic situation, a clash of cultures. The teachers, who are often Indigenous, have been trained to be traditional instructors and absolute authority figures. They are met with considerable difficulty when instructing and spend most of their time disciplining and trying to maintain order, so valued in the classroom. Moreover, these children are entering an enclosed space where they are made to sit still for long periods of time. There is no precedent for this sort of behavior or setting within their community. “Education” takes place out in the open and does not

require hours of sitting still in a classroom. The classroom is, thus, an alien or foreign environment that is often hostile, torturous, or simply boring. An Indigenous teacher² elaborated:

When the children arrive for the first time in the classroom, they feel claustrophobic. And the attitude of the traditional teacher—"I know, you don't, and I am going to teach you"—still persists. It is chaotic, especially for preschoolers, even though it is only three hours. Those who are in first grade suffer more because it is five hours that they have to be seated. The children need to be in constant activity. Many objectives are not reached due to the level of distraction of the children. When Fridays rolled around, they became ecstatic. One day I told them that the following day there would be no class. They all jumped to their feet and shouted for joy. I asked myself, why? They should enjoy coming to class. So I asked them. They told me that they only come to school because their parents make them. They gave me no more explanations as to why they didn't like to come. This is especially true for the girls. They are made to come, and they show little or no interest. By the fifth grade, there are very few girls. They are aware that schooling has no relevance to their lives if they have decided to stay in the community.

When visiting schools in Chiapas, I observed an overall level of "chaos" and distraction of the students, a situation which pressures the teacher to become even stricter. Unfortunately, the old saying in Spanish, *Con sangre entra la letra*—letters enter by blood—becomes more poignant in these contexts, and sometimes students are still being physically punished for speaking in their native languages. Indigenous teachers, cultural intermediaries as such, are "educated" within a Western institution and become convinced that Western cultural values are superior to their own and often bring this attitude to the classroom. One of highest values of a Western classroom setting is order.

The question of relevance of schooling in this context is important and may help explain the high levels of absenteeism and scholastic failure among this population, not only in Mexico and Latin America, but also in other countries around the world. Additionally, the types of jobs available to people who decide to leave the community are largely low paying and generally undesirable, i.e., domestic servants or construction workers. Schooling is not a requirement for these types of jobs. Another teacher affirmed:

The argument of many parents and children is that schooling is not practical for them. It does not put food on the table. Why? It is such a long process. If they finish sixth grade they will not find work. These days not even after finishing middle school because the rules have changed and you have to have a high school education to become a teacher. Of all of the students who do finish grade school, of, let's say, a hundred, maybe two or three will go on to middle school. There is no money and no middle school facilities in the communities.

Rather than becoming easier, it is becoming more and more difficult for Indigenous people to see how schooling is relevant and practical for their lives. As the mounds of new programs and policies for intercultural education pile up, the door is closing even tighter on Indigenous individuals who wish to become teachers

²Due to the delicate nature of the topic, teachers' names are not revealed. These interviews were carried out between November 20 and 28 of 2003 with three different instructors, one Tzotzil and two Tzeltal.

of their own people. These blatant contradictions are widely ignored as the new policies and “pluriculturalism” of Mexico are heralded. The same is true for the teaching of the Indigenous languages. The “bilingual” character of most schools stays on paper. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which has to do with most bilingual teachers are sent to communities where their native language is not spoken (Interview DGIE,³ 2005). One teacher observed:

About this new policy of teaching the languages, I don’t say that it is not occurring at all, but it is minimal. The teachers speak in Spanish. We return to the original problem, we are not speakers of the same language of the children we teach. I am Tzeltal but was sent to a Chol community. I do not speak Chol nor can I learn it from one day to the next.

Another reason was explained to me by an Indigenous teacher, whose argument is that the cornerstone of Indigenous identity, resistance, and persistence in Mexico is the languages:

They are to be guarded and protected. The pretention of the government to teach the Indigenous people their own languages is absurd and dangerous. Very few non-Indigenous people in Mexico speak these languages, and their mode of expression is oral, not written. Many parents send their children to school so that they learn Spanish, citing that teaching them their native language will be done at home.

Suffice it to say that the teaching of Indigenous languages is highly controversial in Mexico. For the purposes of this chapter, what further contributes to a feeling of alienation of children in the classroom is that most Indigenous children do not speak Spanish, nor do their parents. The teacher may be bilingual, but not in the language spoken in the community. This problem constitutes perhaps the most fundamental contradiction of the new “bilingual” and “intercultural” programs for Indigenous children in Mexico.

Indigenous Education

How do Indigenous teachers describe their own education within the community? What is Tzeltal education like? It takes place in the home, in the family, through observation of parents and other adults. Many things that are learned are practiced later. A boy is never told, for example, “Let’s go to the fields.” The steps are not mapped out or made explicit. Everything is through observation. The same occurs with the girls. They are never told to make tortillas or to knit. Nothing is authoritarian; it is implicit. The Tzeltal society knows that everything comes from the family. Another Tzeltal teacher shared:

The education in my culture is much more open, much lighter. You are never made to feel as if you were being taught by the adults, you just do it. I remember learning how to make

³DGEI is the “Dirección General of Indigenous Education”: The Secretary General of Indigenous Education. An official was interviewed on the basis of anonymity. This interview took place on February 22, 2005.

tortillas. I began by grinding the corn when I was very young. I was told if it needed to be finer or not. The same happened with planting potatoes, beans or zucchini. The children are there and the adults help us. We have so much fun. There is such happiness among the children during those times and it is a beautiful experience.

Thus, children are not separated from adults but accompany them throughout the day, constituting another major cultural difference. Author and anthropologist Maldonado reasoned that the long, time-consuming process of schooling distances Indigenous children from their traditional cultural practices and generates ignorance of their own culture (Maldonado, 2002). Education takes place in the “real” world for these children, not behind closed doors under the watchful eye of a lone authority figure. They are subjects of action, not objects.

Consistent with this view, as Chamoux (1992) pointed out:

Informal education is, by definition, education which is transmitted outside of institutional structure. Within indigenous communities there exists no organized institution or systematic form of instruction. There are no rigid courses, quantified stages or grades, initiation rituals, and no exams. (pp. 74–75)

Additionally, Carlos Lenkersdorf, a philologist who lived and worked among the Tojolabal people for more than twenty years, noted that while teaching a literacy course to Tojolabal adults, exams quickly became collective affairs as the entire class would come together to try to answer the questions. When he asked them why, they responded that many minds working together are much better than one (Lenkersdorf, 1996). Herein lies another key cultural difference. Individualism and competition are not considered valuable in many Indigenous cultures. Thus, children in the classroom are pitted against each other and made to compete for grades, another reason for a general feeling of discomfort, confusion, and cultural defenselessness.

Discriminatory Textbooks?

One of the elements affecting the everyday lives of Indigenous children who attend school is the textbook. The last general revision and large-scale content overhaul of textbooks in Mexico took place in 1992. The official textbooks analyzed in this section were reprinted by the Secretary of Public Education (SEP) in 2002 and were still being used in Mexican classrooms in 2008. We limited our scope to grade school textbooks covering History and Geography. These two subjects allowed us to better examine visibility and overall treatment of Indigenous people within the texts. Additionally, most Indigenous children do not study past primary school; therefore, we looked at textbooks for grades 1–6 only.

In addition to the official primary school textbooks which are edited by the “SEP,” the Secretariat of Public Education of Mexico (SEP, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2002f, 2002g, 2002h, 2002i, 2002j), and are utilized by all Mexican children in the public education system, we subsequently explored the more recent “Intercultural Workbooks (SEP, 2002k, 2002l, 2002m),” which were prepared and partially translated into twenty Indigenous languages. We asked ourselves: What will

an Indigenous child find when studying these social documents? Will he/she feel represented and reflected in an adequate and/or respectful manner? Some of the aspects examined were visibility, imagery, and general respect for cultural diversity. Throughout this analysis, we endeavored to place ourselves in the position of an Indigenous child and sought evidence that could contribute to a condition of defenselessness in the classroom.

The Official Textbooks

Children in the first two grades, who are 6 or 7 years old, study one textbook each year entitled *Integrated Textbook for Grades 1 and 2*, covering the subjects of History, Geography, Natural Sciences, and Civic Education (SEP, 2002i). In the first grade textbook, ten historical topics are covered, none of which deals specifically with the pre-Hispanic period nor is there any allusion made to the existence of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, the Conquest of Mexico by Spain is presented in a non-problematic manner. We read: “A long time ago, the inhabitants of America and Europe didn’t know each other. Columbus crossed the ocean and found a pathway between the two continents” (SEP, p. 49). In the second grade textbook, we found: “Columbus arrived to America on October 12. We remember this day, because since that time the inhabitants of the two continents have been able to communicate with each other and learn from each other,” (SEP, 2002j, p. 45). This version is in direct contradiction to what Indigenous children learn from their parents about the “Conquista” and the subsequent *baldo* system (Tajaltik & Lenkersdorf, 2001). Furthermore, most of the children represented in these two textbooks are very light-skinned, making it difficult for most children in Mexico, let alone Indigenous children, to feel identified or represented. Also, many of the objects illustrated are not found in a typical Indigenous community, such as toys, electronics, and processed foods.

In the third grade, when the children are 8 years old, each state has a specific textbook to cover both the history and geography of the state (SEP, 2002g, 2002h). We discovered that, for both Mexico State—which borders Mexico City—and Chiapas, the past tense is used almost exclusively when referring to Indigenous people, even when naming their contributions to, for example, herbal medicine. The “dead Indian” or *indio muerto* is exalted while his/her contemporaries are made invisible. The terms used to describe them are natives, native groups, native population, “naturals,” aborigines, communities, or Indigenous groups. By far, the term most often used is “ethnic group” or simply “group.” It is only in the section dealing with the pre-Hispanic period that they are referred to as “cultures.” The status of “culture” is not conferred to Indigenous people after the Conquista, making the very idea of implementing “intercultural” education questionable. The textbook for Chiapas presents the population of the state in graphs that are manipulated to suggest a very small Indigenous population and then coyly asks the children, “If we compare the urban population with the Indigenous population, which is smaller?”

(SEP, 2002h, p. 59). An Indigenous child would not feel well represented or well respected in these textbooks.

In the fourth grade, when the children are 9 years old, two separate textbooks are used for History and Geography (SEP, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2002f). The History textbook blames the Mesoamerican lordship for not being able to achieve unity, something only the viceroyalty could achieve. It gives thanks to Catholicism and to the priests for having opposed Indigenous religions and having evangelized the people (SEP, 2002d, p. 81). The text triumphantly states, “During viceroyalty a new society was formed in which the indigenous, Spaniards, Africans, and the castes, the most important of which was the *mestizo*, lived harmoniously” (SEP, p. 81). The Mexican identity hinges on being *mestizo*, or mixed race, excluding *no-mestizos*, or Indigenous people. In the Geography textbook, we found a telling quote: “In Mexico there lived different indigenous peoples, who forged great cultures. Later the Conquista took place, and the Spanish and the indigenous gave birth to a new race. They are our ancestors” (SEP, 2002a, p. 149). Autochthonous peoples are relegated definitively to the past, and their continued presence is somehow aberrant, their present subjectivity denied. They, like the Spaniards, are simply “our ancestors.”

The children, now age 10 or 11, study Universal History in the fifth grade and National History in the sixth (SEP, 2002e, 2002f). Both textbooks include timelines denoting important events in history. Considering the information from the previous texts, it is not surprising that in the fifth grade timeline Indigenous people disappear after the Conquista. However, what is rather surprising and telling is that they are not included whatsoever in the timeline of the sixth grade National History textbook. In fact, the said textbook only includes six mentions of Indigenous people total. In the fifth grade textbook, there is a section dedicated to pre-Hispanic cultures and the regions they inhabited (SEP, 2002e, p. 103). It poses the question: “What other *cultures* developed in these regions?” followed by “What *indigenous groups* exist there today?” (SEP, p. 103). This textbook appropriates a grandiose Indigenous past as “ours” and gives thanks to erudite Mexicans and foreigners for having recovered knowledge of these great cultures. The disconnect between past and present is absolute. The decline of the Indigenous population after the Conquista and the growth in importance of the *mestizo* population are recurring themes.

It is perhaps clear that the eyes of an Indigenous child will not find much in the content of these textbooks that would be reaffirming, reassuring, or respectful. In fact, to the contrary, he/she would find that what they possess is not a culture and that their presence is not valued or even recognized.

Intercultural Workbooks for Indigenous Children

As mentioned above, these relatively new workbooks were first published in 2002 by the General Office of Indigenous Education as part of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP, 2002k, 2002l, 2002m). The content is exactly the same for all of

the workbooks; the standard text was partially translated into 20 different Indigenous languages by bilingual Indigenous teachers. It is important to note that these workbooks are conceived as auxiliary materials to accompany the official textbooks explored above and do not have a broad distribution.⁴

There are three workbooks, one for every two grades of primary school (SEP, 2002k, 2002l, 2002m). In this analysis we examine what the Mexican government wants to transmit to Indigenous children and how its content could further contribute to an “undefended child” in the classroom. What is it that these children need to learn, above and beyond what is expected of the rest of the country’s children? We will also search for evidence of stereotypes and cultural condescension or disrespect.

The images on the cover of these three workbooks give us an indication as to what awaits us inside. Front and center stands an Indigenous child pledging allegiance to the Mexican flag. The workbooks include eight sections: *We are Tojolabal Mexicans*; *Let’s Express What We Want, Think and Feel*; *Democracy Is the Responsibility of Everyone*; *Solidarity Between People and Cultures*; *Let’s Take Care of Our Health*; *Let’s Take Care of the Environment*; *Let’s Practice Science*; and *Let’s Practice Technology* (SEP, 2002k, 2002l, 2002m). The prologue clearly states the intention of these materials. Here the children are addressed directly:

We know that basic education is the key to continual development. Therefore, we want to offer you some activities that will help you obtain knowledge, abilities and skills, as well as habits, attitudes and fundamental values which will train you to be *good, smart, honest, clean, hardworking men and women*, and, above all, committed to the development of your culture and your country. (SEP, 2002k, 2002l, 2002m)

What does it mean to be trained or educated to be good, intelligent, clean, honest, and hardworking? Does this imply that these qualities do not currently describe Indigenous children? In the third and fourth grade workbook we found our answer and an echo of this message:

The indigenous heritage of all Mexicans is represented in our national coat of arms. On it the courage and tenacity of our indigenous ancestors is recognized, *smart, good, honest, clean and hardworking men and women*, who covered a great distance before finding the site where our homeland would be built. (SEP, 2002l, p. 26)

In other words, Indigenous people of the past had these qualities, but those who exist today don’t. These citations give us a clear picture of how the state perceives Indigenous people, past and present. Implicit in the allusion to honesty is historic mistrust, bringing to mind the stereotype of “a lying and cheating Indian.” The institution of Indigenous education will take on the grueling but noble task of teaching these children how to become desirable citizens, like their ancestors were. Indigenous children are not only undefended but are described here as undesirable, second-class citizens, in need of redemption through schooling.

⁴When visiting an “intercultural, bilingual” school in Cruzton, Chiapas, in 2005, I found only official textbooks.

Before delving into each workbook individually, we would like to point out some of the commonalities found in all three series. First of all, I call attention to the number of images depicting an activity I often observed in my visits to bilingual schools in Chiapas, i.e., the act of cleaning: Indigenous children dutifully cleaning the schools. The number of times this activity is represented in the workbooks, both of one's body and the surroundings, is significant. What is behind this? Are we seeing one of the most entrenched and derogatory stereotypes of Indigenous people, that they are unclean? Another common characteristic of the workbooks that we did not find in the textbooks is the representation of anger and people who are fighting, drunken, or just sad in general. On the contrary, the children who appear in the regular textbooks are oftentimes cartoonlike characters that seem eternally happy and cheerful. These commonalities betray the presence of a stereotypically negative representation of what life is like in an Indigenous community.

The first unit of the workbook for the first and second graders is dedicated to inculcating "Mexicanness" and love of country (SEP, 2002k). On page 23 in large bold letters, we read: "WE ARE ALL MEXICANS." "We Mexicans have a flag that represents us and identifies us as a great, free and glorious people. When we sing our national anthem we feel great emotion and joy, because our hymn unites us as Mexicans" (SEP, p. 25). These declarations are reoccurring in all three workbooks and give the impression of trying to convince the Tojolabal children of the greatness of Mexico and how grateful they should feel about belonging to the Mexican State. The workbooks read at times like publicity pamphlets for Mexico and "Mexicanness." Implicit is the knowledge that these people might reject this affiliation if they ever had the opportunity. The echo of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas of 1994 is present here.

In a section about personal hygiene, we meet Hilario, "who is unkempt, his body and clothing almost always dirty" (SEP, 2002k, p. 117). Hilario is portrayed surrounded by garbage, next to a garbage can on its side with a rat. In my visits to Chiapas, I never saw garbage or garbage cans strewn around any of the communities I visited or passed. This gives us an idea about the level of ignorance about the reality and landscape of Indigenous communities. Another example of this ignorance can be found in a section with recipes for caramel and other foods not available in the communities.

In the workbook dedicated to the third and fourth graders, we find more of the same. This time being Mexican is reduced to three characteristics. We paraphrase: "We all eat tortillas, we mostly all have Indigenous roots and the immense majority of us speak Spanish" (SEP, 2002l, p. 16). Again, we are remitted to the past with no mention of contemporary Indigenous people who do eat tortillas but do not speak Spanish. Again, the children read about how beautiful Mexico is and how wonderful one feels while singing the national anthem. The children are guided through moral lessons on how to show solidarity and are given an example of a community where "the people think that they don't need anyone, so they don't help anyone" (SEP, 2002l, p. 103). Nothing could be further removed from the daily life experience of solidarity in any Indigenous community in Chiapas. They are also taught about the greatness and power of science and technology and told that without these,

problems cannot be solved. Images abound of the fruits of technology they “should” aspire to: planes, telephones, computers, cars, blenders, helicopters, digital cameras, etc. On the final page, we read what this workbook is supposed to mean to the Indigenous children who read it:

Don’t think for a moment that the work of this Workbook is done: take care of it, keep it safe, and remember that it is your companion and a friend who is always by your side. As you grow up and you need it, take a look at it again: it will always have something to tell you. (SEP, 2002a–m)

This third and fourth grade workbook would pretend to have almost biblical importance for the Indigenous child. Finally, in the fifth and sixth grade workbook, the same topics are dealt with in a more in-depth manner (SEP, 2002m). Again, the courage and tenacity of “our indigenous ancestors” is mentioned, and how those men and women should be an example for all Mexicans today. No such qualities are attributed to the “living” Indigenous. What stands out most in this workbook is the lesson dedicated to health. It begins: “Do you know what health is? It is not enough to know, you also have to act” (SEP, 2002m, p. 117). The children are to decide, based on looking at images of people in different situations, who is taking care of their health and who isn’t. Of the eight situations, six depict “unhealthy” situations: The first five are children in stained clothing eating fruit surrounded by flies, a man drinking alcohol, two men smoking, people drinking from a river, and children seated on the ground with flies around their heads. The sixth is of a man who looks as if he just struck his wife; she is flinching while two children hide behind her back. These images culminate the negative stereotypes so common in Mexico: Indigenous people as dirty, violent, drunken, and irresponsible. Only two images depict “healthy” situations: a couple cleaning their home and people bathing in a river with soap.

Subsequently the paternalist and pejorative tone intensifies:

So how do I stay healthy? You can start by taking a few steps towards general hygiene. We need to keep our bodies and clothing clean [...]. Basically you need three things. Do you know what they are? Find the hidden words, illuminate them and you will know. (SEP, 2002m, p. 118)

Willpower Water Soap

Does citing willpower suggest that Indigenous people are somehow too lazy or apathetic to keep clean? This reoccurring stereotype of uncleanness, conveyed in a paternalistic tone, permeates the pages of these workbooks. In general, the children are told who they are; how they should feel, think, and act; and even how to wash themselves. Implied is the supposed ignorance in general of Indigenous people, even of their own sexuality. Worse is the supposition of dishonesty, laziness, stupidity, and overall maliciousness. These aspects clearly contribute to a condition of defenselessness of Indigenous children in the classroom and beyond.

Conclusion

Maya-Tojolabal children and other Indigenous children in Mexico struggle daily in the classroom due to extreme cultural differences, a lack of respect for their cultures in general, and textbooks that do not represent them. On the contrary, they are made invisible and, when addressed, are patronized and condescended to. We can conclude that these children are, unfortunately, culturally undefended in the classroom, making them vulnerable across their educational life and beyond. What does this mean for future policy? What changes can be made to better this situation?

First of all, it is imperative that communities be consulted about diverging educational techniques and the specific needs of their children. Secondly, the prejudice and the discrimination toward Indigenous people need to be recognized and addressed. Denial of such problems in Mexico and Latin America only exacerbates the situation. Continued research into what underlies these problems is needed. Finally, humility and respect are of utmost importance in cross-cultural communication. These are especially lacking in the area of Indigenous education in Mexico. Stepping back from our universalizing ideas about schooling and being willing to listen and learn from Indigenous peoples like the Maya-Tojolabal of Chiapas will facilitate a better formulation of future policy and may help alleviate the condition of cultural defenselessness of Indigenous children in the classroom.

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