

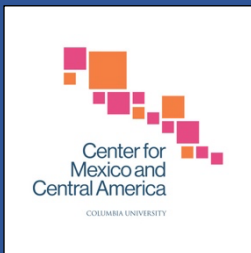
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Indigenous Education and COVID-19 in Guatemala

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Key Words: Guatemala, Indigenous children, Public education, COVID-19

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1. INTRODUCTION

The majority of youths migrating from Guatemala to the United States are Indigenous.¹ This is significant. Indigenous identity influences the types of social and structural barriers youth confront in their home communities, as well as their experiences on the migrant trail and in the United States.² The ways indigeneity impacts youth migrants and their premigration experiences is particularly relevant when considering their educational pathways in Guatemala. For youth in contexts of migration, educational enrollment and attainment are often valorized as indicators of involved and conscientious parenting. Conversely, their lack of enrollment in school is often held as an indicator of parental abuse, abandonment, or neglect. Unfortunately, children’s educational histories are often presented without an understanding of the local educational context, and as a result, these misrepresentations pathologize Indigenous parents who do not send their children to school rather than illuminate the structures that create untenable educational environments for Indigenous children and youth. The objective of this paper is to clarify the educational conditions for Indigenous children and youth in Guatemala. The information presented is based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2018 and 2022 in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. In what follows, I outline the enduring history of Indigenous disenfranchisement in the public education system and present the logics and rationales of non-attendance for Indigenous families. This paper concludes with an update on how the COVID-19 pandemic has had lasting and injurious effects on Indigenous youth and their educational opportunities.

2. RELEVANT HISTORY

Ladinization

From the colonial encounter and subsequent Christianization to assimilation and present-day multi-cultural nationalism, the project of state-sanctioned education in Guatemala has remained a project grounded in epistemic violence for Indigenous peoples. The Guatemalan public education system was built on racialized social and epistemic exclusions that permeate all levels of educational policy and practice. As Guatemalan scholar and former vice minister of the Department of Education, Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (2007) poignantly writes, the state has been historically imbricated in "cultural racism" which disqualifies the ethnic diversity of Indigenous peoples, hoping to standardize the populace through *ladinization*, a standardization which "has been relatively fulfilled via the army and the educational system," and considered by the state to be the civilized solution to the problem of Indigenous peoples

(p.122).³ As such, the inclusion of Indigenous Maya communities in educational projects has been predicated on assumptions of the need to “civilize” and bring Indigenous peoples into a “modern citizenship.”⁴⁵

Elga Martínez Salazar, a scholar who grew up in Guatemala and identifies as mestiza,⁶ recalls all her teachers said “that Europeans, and the knowledge they brought to us in terms of language, religion, science, and so forth, were the pinnacle of civilization, and that we, as ‘backward’ people, had to learn how to become ‘civilized’” (2014, p.10).⁷ Grounded in beliefs about the superiority of European knowledge, conceptualizations of what education is and should look like, embed themselves within the design of Guatemalan public schools, their curricula, the training of teachers, relationships with communities, and the opportunities made available to Indigenous youth and their families. In the 1950s, educational scholars and practitioners predicted the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala as a result of “successful assimilation” into the modern populace.⁸ This prediction was predicated on the explicit state project of acculturation and Ladinization through government programs stressing the integration of Indigenous peoples into a market-based economy.⁹ A fundamental backbone of this assimilating mission was *castellanización* (linguistic assimilation to Spanish) which attempted to systematically strip Indigenous communities of their native languages.

Maya community schools

When the exceedingly violent reign of Efraín Ríos Montt ended in the early 1980s, literacy rates in Guatemala were one of the lowest in the Americas, and public expenditure on education hovered at just over two percent of the GDP.¹⁰ Education for the masses, particularly Indigenous education, was viewed as a leftist threat by the Guatemalan elite. Despite the widespread persecution of educators, by the mid-1980s, Indigenous communities led by Mayan academics and activists began the Maya educational movement, the backbone of which was the development of locally controlled “Maya community schools.” This period also saw the formation of the National Council of Mayan Education to support the revitalization of Mayan culture and language.¹¹ These movements were in direct response to the incommensurability of a dignified education for Indigenous communities and the state-run educational system.

Neoliberal education

Despite this grassroots effort, pressure from the international community following the Peace Accords (in 1996) to standardize educational access and improve educational performance saw the dissolution of these community schools, and financial support shifted to semi-private schools in Indigenous communities under the auspices

of the National Educational Self-Enrollment Program (PRONADE, Programa Nacional de Autogestión Educativa). These schools were backed by the United Nations and had little oversight from the Guatemalan Ministry of Education. While this effort towards private control of Indigenous elementary schools eventually failed, it led to even greater divestment from the public education system by the state and new hurdles for achieving dignified and equitable education within Indigenous communities.

While the 1996 Peace Accords were supposed to guarantee a bilingual and intercultural education for all Guatemalan youth, a lack of Indigenous teachers teaching in Indigenous communities has made this promise a logistical impossibility. Based on my observations in classrooms and interviews with Indigenous educators, it is evident that “intercultural education” has been largely reduced to a teacher bonus for basic knowledge of the Mayan calendar. Otherwise, teachers are on their own when it comes to satisfying the educational requirements as mandated by the Peace Accords. Thus, despite the written intentions, the Ministry of Education’s policies are still considered to be largely based on ethnic discrimination and assimilation.^{12 13 14} Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (2007) argues that a state-sponsored bilingual education program that would “recognize, respect and promote” Indigenous culture is a political impossibility in Guatemala given that the society was built on Indigenous subordination. It is an education that Mayan scholar Giovanni Batz (2018) has described as not “about intellectual growth and empowerment, but rather a system of control” and one that “reproduce[es] hierarchies of knowledge that fuel violence, marginalization, and exclusion of ‘other’ knowledges and worlds” (p.105).¹⁵

Today, Guatemala continues to have one of the lowest expenditures on public education in the Americas. As of 2021, public spending on education in Guatemala was around 3.1 percent.¹⁶ Guatemala spends less on education than every country in the region except El Salvador, behind Costa Rica (6.7 percent), Belize (8.7 percent), and Honduras (6.4 percent).¹⁷ This lack of public investment when combined with an enduring history of assimilation and exclusion for Indigenous peoples results in a public education sector that, while officially free and compulsory, is plagued by inefficiency and corruption.

3. EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS IN GUATEMALA

Accurate contemporary educational statistics are hard to come by. While the Ministry of Education tracks school enrollments across various subcategories, including gender, ethnic identification, age, and geographic location,¹⁸ the most recent corresponding family survey that would help to identify household-level factors that influence educational participation, and to identify youth who have opted out of the system, was last conducted in 2013.¹⁹ Notwithstanding this outdated information, the

educational statistics still identify important factors regarding Indigenous participation in, and opting out of, the formal education system.

The Program for International Student Assessment- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (PISA-OECD) Guatemala program has highlighted the low educational performance of Guatemalan students nationwide. Guatemala has high percentages of students performing significantly below grade level in reading (70% of students), math (89% of students), and science, a performance lower than every other country in Latin America with the exception of Paraguay and Honduras.²⁰ These educational weaknesses exacerbate over time as youth with relatively low academic skill formation are passed to the next grade level only to encounter increasingly challenging academic content. This dynamic generates academic struggles that reduce the perceived benefit of schooling and is particularly noticeable in national secondary school enrollment levels. Nationwide, only 20% of eligible youth are enrolled in upper secondary school.²¹ This statistic, as a national average, demonstrates the dismal overall quality of public education and low levels of educational coverage, but it does not attend to the specific experiences for Indigenous youth.

Studies estimate that Indigenous youth are 15% less likely to attend primary school than their non-Indigenous peers, a number which increases as students reach secondary school.²² In fact, the only greater determinants of school attendance than indigeneity in Guatemala are rurality and poverty. While nearly half of Guatemala lives in poverty, that number rises to 80% for the Indigenous population, and the majority of Guatemala's Indigenous population resides in rural areas.²³ Thus, the risk factors for non-participation in the school system are multiplied for Indigenous children and youth.

4. OPTING OUT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

There are many reasons why Indigenous children and youth may not be enrolled in school. Rather than evaluating their absence from the system as a fault of their parents or families, these reasons are rational responses to conditions that structurally exclude Indigenous youth and children from meaningful participation in the system. In the 54 formal interviews I conducted with rural Indigenous youth, they reported that schools are often geographically inaccessible, lacking in even the most basic supplies, and staffed by teachers who frequently do not speak the Indigenous language of their pupils. Families find themselves being asked to pay for desks, books, and even teacher fees when the government fails to pay their salaries. In fact, upwards of 40% of rural youths between 13 to 30 years old state that lack of finances is the primary explanation for not attending school. The next largest group, at close to 20% of respondents, are youths who “don't like school” or “do not want to attend.”²⁴

There are valid reasons why young people may not be interested in attending school. In the interviews I conducted, youth describe how the education system devalues their community resources and positions Indigenous peoples and knowledges as insufficient. In my research, many youths explain how teachers are “repressive,” leaving them with a sense of panic in the classroom and driving down student participation in the system. One young man who had recently graduated high school described his experiences in grade school in the following way:

It was a psychological repression, if we could not read well, they would hit us on the head saying, ‘*medio mudo, no sabes leer*’ (half dumb, you don’t know how to read). All of the other students watching and crouched down, and we would say to ourselves, ‘am I going to go to school if they treat me like this?’ and, ‘if *primaria* (elementary school) is this hard, I cannot imagine *básico* (middle school).’

His experience led him to want to drop out of school and to migrate to the United States instead. His older brother convinced him to continue with his education, however many of his peers did indeed opt out of the education system altogether. In another example, a young woman discussed how in school, Indigenous students were taught that they were less than human:

We have these...we have these riches, but the system is saying that they [Indigenous people] are poor, that agriculture is poor, that all the work the Indigenous do is poor, weaving, the cultures, it is poor for them. All of this is poor for them. They totally change the history, they don’t tell you how it is... what they teach you doesn’t have anything to do with culture, they tell you that the Indigenous don’t bathe every day, that they are filthy, they say that you have to opt for the more westernized culture, that is more modern, the culture of humans, so it is difficult.

She went on to explain that all she would do in her classrooms was “copying, memorizing and copying, copying, copying” and that, “if you did not understand well, you did not understand. No one was going to explain how to resolve the doubts you had.” Indigenous young people frequently described their experiences in school as both traumatic and belittling, where they were taught that they were less-than and unworthy of the teacher’s time. Others I interviewed explained that the schools serving their communities were set up “only to create workers” and that the Guatemalan government “doesn’t want us to have the ability to think critically.” These descriptions made tangible the violence of exclusion in the educational system where Indigenous worldviews and practices are not represented, and Indigenous students are actively demeaned as less than human.

In addition to this poor treatment, many Indigenous communities have no local school, which means that to attend school, children have to walk long distances with no guarantee of the quality of the education they would receive once they arrive. Given this context, students and families frequently determine that they will be better served through learning and working within the family system. This discernment is a rational choice. Schooling is often viewed as a waste of time, outside of the lifelong education that occurs within the family and community.^{25 26} As such, the formal school becomes a place to send unruly children who are not likely to contribute to collective well-being.²⁷ Many families are also critical of teachers, who are almost exclusively non-Indigenous Ladinos.²⁸ Historically, it was not uncommon for parents to hide their children from local truant officers who would attempt to round up school-age children and force them to attend elementary school.²⁹ While this practice is less common today, it does still occur, with both parents and students expressing concern that children risk both physical and mental abuse in the classroom. The Ministry of Education considers the practice of hiding children from state officials as an act of ignorance on the part of local communities. It is more accurate, however, to view this practice as an act of refusal by Indigenous families in response to assimilationist state projects.

While formal educational attainment does result in some measurable gains for Indigenous students in the labor market, these gains are the lowest in Central America, with students who finish high school only receiving a 15% increase in their earning potential over their peers who have opted out of the education system.³⁰ Implicit costs to school participation – including economic stress for the family unit and socio-emotional trauma for students – are often understood as outweighing the meager benefits that a formal education might provide. Decisions within the family unit around education, then, should not be understood as acts of neglect or ignorance on the part of caretakers. Rather, there are significant structural barriers that prevent Indigenous youth from receiving a quality education and opting out of formal education can be an educated, careful choice.

5. COVID-19 AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system in Guatemala was particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. School was suspended nationwide in March of 2020. While private schools turned to the use of apps and other technology-mediated learning methods, this was not possible in public schools, particularly in rural areas. According to a 2020 government report by the Consejo Nacional de la Juventud (National Youth Council), only 12% of rural youth have access to a computer, 62% have use of a cellphone, and only 24% have access to the internet by any means.³¹ In response to these structural realities, the Guatemalan Ministry of Education began televising classes for students nationwide, as part of this effort, each grade level received 30 minutes of instruction

three days a week.³² This was supposed to be augmented by didactic materials sent to schools and then distributed to families on a weekly basis. The intention was for students to complete these materials at home and then return the materials to the school to be assessed by local teachers.

While many more households have access to television than the internet, there is far from universal coverage in Guatemalan households, particularly among rural and Indigenous households that may not have reliable access to electricity.³³ Adult literacy rates are also a significant factor impacting the feasibility and success of the COVID-19 educational plan. According to the most recent Guatemalan census, nearly 30% of Indigenous adults are illiterate. This statistic became particularly meaningful when, during COVID-19, parents were expected to assist their children in completing the work packets sent home by the Ministry of Education. Unsurprisingly, for many Indigenous children, these factors meant that there was little to no academic support during the two full academic years of school closure because of the pandemic.

Guatemalan public schools officially reopened in 2022. However, as a result of unsafe building conditions, lack of educators, as well as vaccine and space requirements, there are still 9,000 schools in 138 municipalities that remain either fully closed or are operating on modified schedules.³⁴ In rural schools prior to the pandemic, it was common to have 40 or more students in a classroom served by one educator. As a result of the pandemic, this classroom density is no longer considered legal, and schools are forced to create workarounds. This includes groups of children coming in shifts or on specific days of the week to limit the number of learners in each classroom. In some cases, students are being entirely pushed out of public education. For example, my interlocutors have reported that in some public schools, students who are achieving academically have been asked to remain at home to give their classmates “time to catch up.” In a system where students were already being educated at levels far below global and regional standards, cutting instructional time in half is a devastating disservice.

Schools have also experienced severe staffing shortages because of teachers’ concerns about safe working conditions during the continued pandemic. As a result, educators are asked to teach multiple grade levels at once or teach in multiple schools on the same day. As an example, one teacher told me how she was responsible for teaching a first-grade classroom in the morning from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and then had to walk 45 minutes to get to another school where she would teach sixth graders in the afternoon. Despite union protections, she was worried she would lose her job if she complained about these working conditions – conditions which she felt made it impossible to do her job well.

Given the educational environment in Guatemala for predominately rural Indigenous youth, it is not surprising that the global pandemic has been particularly injurious to their continued educational attainment. These structural issues are only exacerbated by the fact that in Guatemala, the government’s investment in education on a national level has *decreased* over the course of the pandemic,³⁵ and among the governing elite there seems to be little will to counter this divestment.

6. CONCLUSION

In Guatemala, public school is officially free and accessible; however, as this paper has demonstrated, public education is not actually accessible to all students. In particular, rural Indigenous youth are often structurally foreclosed from attending school. Even when attending school is technically feasible, families may decide that attending school is not in the best interest of their children. This decision is educated and rational. In Guatemala, schools serving Indigenous youth are characterized by poor infrastructural conditions, violent discrimination, and their inability to promise discernably better outcomes for students and their families in the long run. Therefore, opting out of the education system is not a practice of ignorance nor indicative of a lack of parental care. Instead, it is a practice of parents and families determining the educational pathways that are in the best interests of their children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Briana Nichols has a joint Ph.D. in Education and Anthropology. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Latin American Studies at Rutgers University. Her work centers on youth living in communities of extensive migration who fight for non-migratory futures. Specifically, she examines the intersection between transnational development, international migration, and Indigenous educational striving in Guatemala.

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