

Dilemmas Facing Oaxacan-Indigenous-Origin Youth in the United States

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In the early 1990s, migrants of indigenous origin from the state of Oaxaca working as agricultural laborers in California's Central Valley decided to take their children to the United States due to the privations they suffered in their communities, sharpened by the effects of Mexico's neo-liberal policies on the peasantry.¹ New family members were born in their destination country.² Some of the migrant children, today young adults, still do not have documents legalizing their stay and live in the shadow of deportation. Others have benefitted from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. However, not all have been eligible due to the lack of one document or another, because they do not fulfill some other prerequisite, or because of the high cost of the paperwork.

Those born in the United States also face obstacles for studying, working, and decidedly for improving their families' situation. This is despite the prevailing impression that they

have "more opportunities" to make their parents' life aspirations a reality, the aspirations they had when they arrived in "California, the land of opportunity," where they have spent their youth.

These young people belong to a generation that has been born or grown up in California's Madera and Fresno Counties, both prominent agricultural areas. Thanks to their families' efforts, and in contrast with their parents, most have been able to go to school, although this is not necessarily the case of all the sons and daughters of indigenous Oaxacan immigrants living there. This makes them "the privileged of the excluded," who live between two distinct cultural worlds. On the one hand, they have inherited from their parents all the cultural baggage of their ethnic heritage, and, on the other hand, they live in a heavily racialized society, which considers them Hispanics, Latinos, or "people of color." It is in the link-up of these contexts that they construct their daily lives. The specialized literature deals with this, calling it "living transnationally," which consists of a wide gamut of relationships and practices that make it possible to reproduce their origins even at a distance.³

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The life experience of these young people of indigenous origin includes shifting generational tensions and negotiations discussed inside families with different levels of loyalty and orientation. One of these is a critical revision of the parents' community life, contrasted with the U.S. cultural surroundings, where the norms for youth are more permissive than in the parents' home communities.⁴

The relevant literature points to the school system as the main space for assimilation for the sons and daughters of immigrants, together with learning English. Schooling levels are a factor that often determines the kind of job a young person will get when finishing high school, community college, or university.

The social inequalities prevailing in a country are reproduced in school given that it has its own means of internal segregation.⁵ However, what educational structure do these young people have access to? And what are the strategies they use to be able to study?

For young people of Oaxacan indigenous origin, accessing the educational system is a challenge in itself, both from an economic and a cultural and symbolic point of view. This is due to the combination of a series of factors, among which are their parents' and themselves being migrants, the significance of study for the family, and its economic cost or their access to loans and scholarships.

Armida, a young woman of Mixtec origin born in Madera County, came under pressure from her family when making the decision to continue her university studies or not. The decision was made by consensus by her family given that the possibility of educational mobility in a program for outstanding students was what her parents had hoped for for their daughter. However, Armida did not necessarily share those aspirations, because they meant being away from her family and dealing with a series of adverse situations, among them, constant discrimination.⁶

When young people go to school, they begin to have their first experiences of discrimination, including racism, on the part of Anglos and Mexicans alike. This is particularly the case while they learn English, a time in which the new language can get mixed up with Spanish and, in some cases, with the indigenous language (Mixtec, Zapotec, or Triqui).⁷ In this complicated process, some young people become bi- or trilingual.⁸ Their use of the indigenous language combines with their phenotype (mainly the color of their skin) to unleash double discrimination, to the point of affecting their mobility, according to the experiences these young people have

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related. In Anglo society, people often believe that the darker a person's skin, the "less intelligent" they are. Therefore, some of these values strongly imbued with discrimination are sometimes internalized, which means that, in some contexts, the young people deny their ethnic backgrounds.

Their studies are paid for by family efforts, although these young people also seek government financing through work-study programs and university loans, usually offered with interest.⁹ If they came to the United States as children, access to this kind of financing is more complicated depending on whether they have documented residency or not, since if they do not, they must pay much higher tuition as foreign students.

Some studies have delved deeply into the reason why some young people fulfill their educational aspirations and others do not. And, ethnic origin has an important place among the factors.¹⁰

Pedro, a young man of Triqui origin who arrived in Madera as a child, is negotiating with his family to stay there. His mother, tired of working in the fields after more than 15 years, without documents to allow her to stay legally, is considering returning with her family to their hometown in Oaxaca. The dilemma is that Pedro has been an outstanding student, and thanks to that, has gotten a job in the medical care system serving the immigrant population, something he achieved with a great deal of effort and thanks to being trilingual. For him, the idea of returning means missing out on his personal aspirations and practically losing his life in the United States altogether. In this case, the family decision becomes a day-to-day negotiation in which people continually experience the hope of regularizing their presence in the United States or returning to Mexico.¹¹

Entering the labor market is a key issue for understanding immigrants and their descendants, as well as for knowing the kind of jobs and in what conditions they enter the global market. When most Oaxacan indigenous families arrived to the United States to work in the fields, they were unfamiliar with the California laws that banned child labor and

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forced them to send their children to school. For this reason, some young people went to school without this being a family initiative and occasionally worked in the fields on weekends to make money and pay for their studies.

Studies have found that young people often experience agricultural labor as something without value; also, a paradox exists because it inflicts a stigma on them, something they carry with them by inheritance or because of their history, but that at the same time they need in order to get away from “a life that makes no sense.” This may be related to the idea that in the context in which they are living, a stereotype has been created that says that if you belong to a family from Oaxaca, you can only work as an agricultural laborer without considering the educational capital you are creating.

Some studies ask whether young people of indigenous origin will continue doing the jobs their parents have done,¹² or if labor mobility exists, which would imply ethnic replacement in the U.S. agricultural sector.¹³ On the one hand, we need to understand the strategies these young people use to make their way forward in the world of work and know what their capacities, strengths, and expectations are in terms of searching for better job and life opportunities. For example, some of them plan to continue their graduate studies outside the United States, find jobs better suited to their educational level in different countries, place new value on their bilingual or trilingual abilities in order to be considered candidates in the labor market with more competencies, and even return to Oaxaca.

It has been seen that among the most important dilemmas these young people face is family negotiation about access to the school system and the labor market. In this sense, what do these experiences tell us? They speak to a cultural complexity that includes a generational dispute between young people and their parents. The young feel the urgent need to change things and have a capacity for change that makes them question themselves and think critically. This is related to what they do in their day-to-day lives and often makes them confront their family heritage. Thus, a discussion

opens up about knowledge and cultural permanence, which are also the result of individual decisions in the quest for better living conditions. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Some of them had benefitted from the 1986 amnesty provided by the Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA).
- ² The children brought into the country have been called “Generation 1.5” because they arrived in their infancy, and those born in the U.S. are second generation.
- ³ See Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Perspectivas internacionales sobre migración,” in Alejandro Portes and Dewind Hosh, comps., *Repensando las migraciones. Nuevas perspectivas teóricas y empíricas* (Mexico City: INM/Universidad de Zacatecas/Porrúa, 2006), pp. 191-230.
- ⁴ Nancy Foner and Joanna Debry, “Relations between the Generations in Immigrant Families,” *The Annual Review of Sociology* no. 37, 2011, pp. 545-564.
- ⁵ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Los herederos. Los estudiantes y la cultura* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2012), chapters “La elección de los elegidos,” pp. 11-45, and “¿Aprendices o aprendices de brujo?” pp. 81-99.
- ⁶ Interview with Armida by the author in 2012 as part of the fieldwork for her master’s thesis in cultural studies, titled “OaxAmericans: La construcción de la identidad étnica en las y los jóvenes de origen indígena de Oaxaca en Madera y Fresno, California, Estados Unidos,” done at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, <https://www.colef.mx/posgrado/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/TESIS-COMPLETA-HERNANDEZ-MARIA-EUGENIA.pdf>.
- ⁷ Not all the children learn the indigenous language, a circumstance closely linked to the policies of imposing Spanish on First Peoples, policies that began in the nineteenth century whereby they were forced to learn Spanish as their first language to “integrate” them into national Mexican society.
- ⁸ Those who arrived in the U.S. as small children learned Spanish by socializing with other children in school at the same time that they were learning English. Those born in the United States learned Spanish with their families and English in school. Many parents even speak only their indigenous language and little Spanish. English also gives the young the power of being the intermediaries between their parents and U.S. society. This can be seen when parents need to know something about red tape, when the translation by their children becomes indispensable. Cases are also known in which the parents speak only their native language and Spanish and the U.S.-born children speak only English that they have learned at school, making the oldest child the interpreter inside the family, where language skills are disparate.
- ⁹ This depends on the little girl or boy’s academic record since primary school, because, with grades higher than other students, they can get support and admission to the most prestigious universities. A university selection process also includes a long and sometimes torturous road on which ethnic origin is important.
- ¹⁰ William Pérez, *We are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2009).
- ¹¹ Interview by the author in 2014.
- ¹² Andrés Pedreño Cánovas, *Que no sean como nosotros. Trayectorias formativo-laborales de los hijos de familias inmigrantes en el campo murciano* (Murcia, Spain: Editum/Universidad de Murcia, 2013).
- ¹³ Carol Zabín, *Mixtec Migrant Farmworkers in California Agriculture. A Dialogue among Mixtec Leaders, Researchers and Farm Labor Advocates* (Davis, California: California Institute for Rural Studies/Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1992).