

Indigenous Latinx Students: Visibility and Empowerment in the American School System

Nadia Almasalkhi

A joint publication from Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative & the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley

In the United States, people from Latin America are typically referred to as *Latinx* or *Hispanic*. These generic labels disguise the diversity within Latin American populations and result in widespread unawareness about Indigenous Latin Americans especially. This lack of awareness creates problems in the United States, where Indigenous people make up a growing share of immigrants from Latin America and are also among those in the most vulnerable and precarious situations.

Anecdotal evidence illustrates some of the problems caused by U.S. ignorance of Indigenous peoples from Latin America. For example, Maya-descendent Guatemalans, who were subjected to systematic genocide in the 1980s,¹ have been immigrating to the United States in growing numbers;² yet, an asylum-seeking Maya family spent years in limbo because the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) was unprepared for encounters with speakers of their language.³ These asylum-seekers also faced obstacles in U.S. asylum proceedings due to cultural

1 Navarro, Mireya. 1999. "Guatemalan Army Waged 'Genocide,' New Report Finds." *The New York Times*, February 26; USC Shoah Foundation. 2019. "Guatemalan Genocide." Los Angeles: University of Southern California.

2 Brown, William and Mary Odem. 2011. "Living Across Borders: Guatemala Maya Immigrants in the US South." *Southern Spaces*, February 16; Kral, Karla. 1996. "Maya in Exile: Guatemalans in Florida." *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, September; Bernstein, Joanna. 2019. "After Fleeing Guatemala, Some Ixil Immigrants Are Seeing Pittsburg As a Destination for a New Community." *Public Source*, January 29.

3 Observed first-hand by the author.

"...monolithic assumptions about immigrants from Latin America lead to real problems and harm, contributing to the social marginalization...of Indigenous immigrants from Latin America (IILAs)"

differences in articulating their ethnicity or social group membership,⁴ which is one of the legal bases for successful asylum claims in the United States.⁵ As another example, Indigenous immigrants from Latin America (IILAs) make up 6 percent of all farmworkers in the United States⁶ and are uniquely vulnerable to employer abuse.⁷ However, a human rights organization only sent a Spanish-speaking investigator to interview Mexican farmworkers in Florida about their labor conditions; the oversight quickly became apparent because the first farmworker the investigator encountered spoke only Mixteco,⁸ an Indigenous language spoken by over half a million people in southern Mexico.⁹

In both of these examples, we see how a lack of understanding about the diversity within Latin American immigrant populations leads to

4 Observed first-hand by the author.

5 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. 2021. "Asylum."

6 Farmworker Justice. 2019. "Selected Statistics on Farmworkers (2015-16 Data)." Accessed June 15, 2021.

7 Farmworker Justice. n.d. "Who We Serve." Accessed June 15, 2021; Mines, Richard, Sandra Nichols, Anna Garcia, and David Runsten. 2007-2009. "Inequity." *The Indigenous Farmworkers Study*. Los Angeles: The California Endowment; Migration Dialogue. 1995. "Mixtec Farm Workers." *Rural Migration News* 1(4).

8 Personal communication with BIMi student-affiliate, 2021.

9 Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI). 2020. "Población de 3 años y más hablante de lengua indígena mixteco por entidad federativa según sexo, años censales de 2010 y 2020." Accessed June 15, 2021.



organizations being unprepared to fulfill what should be a predictable need. These anecdotes demonstrate how monolithic assumptions about immigrants from Latin America lead to real problems and harm, contributing to the social marginalization, legal precarity, and poor employment conditions of ILLAs. This highlights the need in the United States for increased public and institutionalized recognition of Indigeneity, for better cultural understanding of ILLAs, and for qualified interpreters of Indigenous languages. Schools are uniquely positioned to foster increased recognition of Indigeneity, increased understanding of Indigenous cultures, and increased proficiency in Indigenous languages—and research by BIMl-affiliate Dr. Patricia Baquedano-López suggests how this could be accomplished.

Indigeneity in U.S. Schools

Dr. Baquedano-López, a BIMl affiliate and Associate Professor of Education at UC Berkeley, studies the Maya diaspora from the Yucatan in San Francisco's Mission District and the role that schools play in their community. Based on her years of ethnographic research, Dr. Baquedano-López has recommendations for how schools in San Francisco and elsewhere can better serve ILLA communities and their children and enhance public awareness of intra-Latinx diversity.

Identification of ILLA Students and Families

First, Dr. Baquedano-López recommends that school districts count their Indigenous Latinx student and parent population. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) already does this by identifying how many of their students and families speak Mam, an Indigenous language spoken by many immigrants from Guatemala. OUSD's count of Mam-speaking students and parents reveals that their schools serve "more than 3,000 Mam-speaking families,"¹⁰ constituting 3.6 percent of their student population.¹¹ OUSD thus employs a full-time Mam interpreter in their English Language Learner program,¹² contracts with community-based organizations to offer additional on-call Mam interpretation services,¹³ and

10 Sasaki, John. 2020. "OUSD Board of Education to Vote Thursday Evening on Declaring November Indigenous People's Heritage Month." *Great School Voices*, November 12.

11 Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). 2021. "Fast Facts - 2020-21 - OUSD Districtwide." Accessed June 15, 2021.

12 Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). n.d. "English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement (ELLMA) / Team." Accessed June 15, 2021.

13 Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). 2020. "OUSD Translation & Community Navigator Reference Sheet." Accessed June 15, 2021.

TK-5 Students in SFUSD

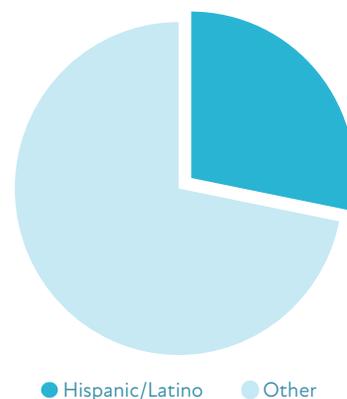


Figure 1. Latinx students make up over a 28.2 percent of San Francisco's elementary school students—but the share of Indigenous Latinx students is unknown. Data source: SFUSD Public Data Dashboard, 2021.

provides information for parents already translated into Mam on some of their websites.¹⁴

In San Francisco, on the other hand, ILLAs and their children, like the Yucatec-Maya students and families Dr. Baquedano-López works with, are administratively labeled as "Hispanic/Latino"¹⁵ even though their language, culture, and needs are distinct from those of most other Latinx people in the United States. No data is available on Indigenous languages spoken in the San Francisco Unified School District, and the district appears to not have institutionalized translation and interpretation services for languages other than Arabic, Mandarin, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.¹⁶ Parents who are only proficient in an Indigenous language would thus face obstacles in contacting their children's schools and accessing basic information about their children's education. This puts ILLA students at a disadvantage since parent involvement in elementary education significantly boosts student performance and long-term success.¹⁷

14 For example, see Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). n.d. "Family Central - Internet." Accessed June 15, 2021.

15 San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). 2020. "Facts about SFUSD at a Glance." Accessed June 15, 2021.

16 San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). n.d. "Translation and Interpretation Services for Families." Accessed June 15, 2021.

17 Reynolds, Arthur J., Nancy A. Mavrogenes, Nikolaus Bezruczko, and Mavis Hagemann. 1996. "Cognitive and Family-Support Mediators of Preschool Effectiveness: A Confirmatory Analysis." *Child Development* 67(3):119-140; McWayne, Christine, Virginia Hampton, John Fantuzzo, Heather L. Cohen, and Yumiko Sekino. 2004. "A Multivariate Examination of Parent Involvement and the Social and Academic Competencies of Urban Kindergarten Children." *Psychology in the Schools* 41:363-377; Miedel, Wendy T. and Arthur J. Reynolds. 1999. "Parent involvement in early intervention for disadvantaged children: Does it matter?" *Journal of School Psychology* 37(4):379-402.

...the data collected erases important ethnic, cultural, and linguistic distinctions by grouping diverse students together as “Hispanic/Latino.”

School districts already collect demographic information about students and their parents in order to assess ethnic/racial equity in schools¹⁸ and tailor services and accommodations to the needs of the community.¹⁹ However, those efforts are undermined when the data collected erases important ethnic, cultural, and linguistic distinctions by grouping diverse students together as “Hispanic/Latino.” Identifying *Indigenous* Latinxs and speakers of Indigenous would correct this and better equip schools to support equitable student achievement.

Enumeration has benefits that stretch beyond schools as well. Counting Indigenous Latinx people in a school district would affect the entire locality as residents realize that Indigenous people are part of their community.²⁰ In other words, it would increase public awareness of IILAs in the United States.

Education by, about, and for IILAs

The second recommendation is for state and local education policy to facilitate the active and equitable involvement of IILA parents in their children’s education and to support culturally-relevant pedagogy. Parental involvement in schools has long been recognized in education research as a helpful factor in student achievement,²¹ and this

holds true for students with immigrant parents.²² Professor Baquedano-López advocates for involving IILA parents as occasional co-teachers in K-5 classrooms. For example, IILA parents could lead social studies class sessions and teach students about their community’s history and culture; or, they could teach students about their community’s artforms during language arts sessions or arts and crafts sessions. Dr. Baquedano-López has observed, however, that rigid policies about classroom time-use and strict curriculum standards set at the state level posed a barrier to this kind of involvement.²³

In addition to supporting the success of IILA-origin students, there are several positive impacts of inviting Indigenous Latinx parents into the classroom for non-Indigenous students and the community at-large. A nationwide study showed that when U.S. schools acknowledge Native American and Indigenous peoples in their curriculum, it is almost exclusively in reference to the 19th century and earlier, making it appear that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas do not exist in the modern world.²⁴ Allowing an Indigenous parent to share their knowledge in the classroom could be a powerful way for children to learn that Indigenous peoples and cultures do exist and are part of our society in the present-day. Such lessons can also be impactful for non-Indigenous Latinx students who are already aware of Indigenous Latinx peoples. In Latinx communities, Indigenous identities are often stigmatized;²⁵ having an Indigenous Latinx parent act as a co-teacher would send a strong message to students that Indigenous identities and cultures are valuable and worthy of respect. In sum, involving IILA parents as co-teachers in elementary school classrooms would improve the younger generation’s awareness of, familiarity with, and respect for IILA communities.

18 Office for Civil Rights. 2021. “Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).” U.S. Department of Education, May 7.

19 Cuiccio, Cary and Marie Husby-Slater. 2018. “Needs Assessment Guidebook: Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments.” Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, State Support Network; Means, Barbara, Christine Padilla, Larry Gallagher, and SRI International. 2010. “Use of Education Data at the Local Level: From Accountability to Instructional Improvement (PDF).” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development.

20 To learn more about how the ethnic/racial categories on population surveys impact a community’s self-image, read *National Colors* by UC Berkeley Professor of Sociology Mara Loveman. Loveman, Mara. 2014. *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America*. Oxford University Press.

21 Henderson, Anne T. 1987. *The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement Improves Student Achievement. An Annotated Bibliography*. National Committee for Citizens in Education Special Report.

22 Bazzi-Gates, Rola. 2015. “The Effect of Arab American Parental Involvement in School-Based And Home-Based Activities That Support The Academic Performance of Their Children During The Elementary School Years.” PhD Dissertation, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

23 Baquedano-López, Patricia, Rebecca Anne Alexander, and Sera J. Hernandez. 2013. “Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What Teacher Educators Need to Know.” *Review of Research in Education* 37(1):149–82.

24 Shear, Sarah B., Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden & Antonio J. Castro. 2015. “Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards.” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43(1):68–101.

25 Chavez-Dueñas, Nayeli Y., Hector Y. Adames, and Kurt C. Organista. 2014. “Skin-Color Prejudice and Within-Group Racial Discrimination: Historical and Current Impact on Latino/a Populations.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 36(1):3–26.



Within the confines of current education policy that poses barriers to parents' classroom involvement, teachers can support IILA-origin students and communities by developing culturally-relevant lessons. For example, when teaching a science lesson on plants, teachers with many Yucatec-Maya students (like in San Francisco's Mission district) could use examples from plants that are native to the Yucatan Peninsula. In addition to expanding the multicultural literacy of all students, culturally-relevant teaching strategies like these would promote Indigenous Latinx students' classroom engagement,²⁶ feelings of motivation,²⁷ and self-confidence.²⁸

"...teachers can support IILA-origin students and communities by developing culturally-relevant lessons."

Facilitation of Extracurricular Programs

Third, Dr. Baquedano-López recommends that schools and school districts support and make space for extracurricular cultural activities and language classes that help IILA students retain their culture, identity, and distinctive skills while integrating into the United States.

All levels of U.S. government have endorsed the goal of preserving Indigenous/Native American languages and cultures.²⁹ The San Francisco Unified School District has an "Indian Education Program," which offers an extracurricular cultural enrichment program plus additional academic support systems

to eligible students.³⁰ However, as a federally-funded Title VII program, only students whose tribes have been legally recognized within the United States can enroll in this program.³¹ This precludes Indigenous students whose communities are concentrated in areas beyond U.S. borders, like in the Yucatan Peninsula or Central America.³²

Providing facilities for regular language classes and cultural events would help IILA students retain their heritage language and culture. Fostering multilingualism can be very important for IILA students, especially for those in transnationally-oriented households—that is, households that maintain cross-border links to their origin-communities. In her fieldwork with Yucatec-Maya people in San Francisco, Professor Baquedano-López found that many had migrated to financially support their family who stayed behind in the Yucatan. The Yucatec-Maya in San Francisco thus maintain strong cross-border ties to their loved ones in the Yucatan. For transnational families like these, losing fluency in the Indigenous language would effectively sever a young IILA's familial ties to cousins, grandparents, and even siblings. Furthermore, language retention is vital for IILA students whose families intend to return to their origin-community. Dr. Baquedano-López found that in addition to providing for relatives left behind, many Yucatec-Maya people in San Francisco had come to the United States to earn money to purchase land in the Yucatan to work on. In other words, these families intend to return-migrate to their origin-communities in the Yucatan. Return-migrants who lack fluency in their heritage language face major obstacles to establishing successful lives in their origin-community,³³ underscoring the stakes of language retention for young IILAs and the children of IILAs. Schools' facilitation of Indigenous students' multilingualism and multiculturalism is important for empowering them to maintain cross-border familial links, and, in the case of return-migration, to successfully adapt to living in their families' origin-communities.

26 Howard, Tyrone C. 2001. "Telling Their Side of the Story: African-American Students' Perceptions of Culturally Relevant Teaching." *The Urban Review* 33:131-149.

27 Milner, H. Richard. 2011. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Diverse Urban Classroom." *The Urban Review* 43:66-89.

28 Souryasack, Rassamichanh and Jin Sook Lee. 2007. "Drawing on Students' Experiences, Cultures and Languages to Develop English Language Writing: Perspectives from Three Lao Heritage Middle School Students." *Heritage Language Journal* 5(1):79-97; Hubert, Tarcia Lasha. 2014. "Learners of Mathematics: High School Students' Perspectives of Culturally Relevant Mathematics Pedagogy." *Journal of African American Studies* 18:324-336.

29 Keeling, Brock. 2019. "San Francisco to Create American Indian Cultural District." *Curbed San Francisco*, November 19; Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. 2020. "On Native American Day, Governor Newsom Takes Action to Restore Land, Promote Equity for California Native Communities." Sacramento, CA; *Native American Languages Act*. Public Law 101-477, 104 U.S. Statutes at Large 1152 (1990).

30 San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). n.d. "Indian Education Program, Title VII." Accessed June 7, 2021.

31 Office of Indian Education. 2014. *Formula Grant Electronic Application System for Indian Education (Formula Grant EASIE) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Part 1*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

32 Bureau of Indian Affairs, Branch for Acknowledgement and Research. 1997. *The Official Guidelines to the Federal Acknowledgement Regulations, 25 CFR 83*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior.

33 Ramirez, Adriana. 2019. "El Sueño Mexicano: Returning Migrant Youth's Adaptation Experience in Mexico." *Center for Latin American Studies, UC Berkeley* (blog), April 22.



“Indigenous Latinx students in U.S. schools may grow up to serve as vital bridges between their own community and U.S. institutions”

Supporting Indigenous Latinx students in maintaining their culture and especially their language is also in the interest of U.S. society in general. Indigenous Latinx students in U.S. schools may grow up to serve as vital bridges between their own community and U.S. institutions and organizations. For example, a Maya student who is supported in retaining their language into adulthood may go on to interpret for future Maya immigrants and refugees in their interactions with immigration authorities. Or, a Mixtec student who grows up in the United States with access to Mixtec language classes may connect Mixtec farmworkers to civil society organizations that can help them fight unjust labor practices. Even non-Indigenous people would gain opportunities to learn Indigenous languages and perform this bridging function. In sum, supporting Indigenous language preservation through school-based extracurricular activities will pave the way to combat the social marginalization, legal precarity, and poor employment conditions of Indigenous immigrants from Latin America in the future.

Projected Impacts

The research conducted by BIMl-affiliate Professor Baquedano-López lays out practical steps that U.S. schools and school districts can take to foster positive outcomes on the individual and communal levels. By following these recommendations, schools and school districts can accomplish four things:

1. Support the academic success of Indigenous Latinx students.
2. Empower IILA parents to be informed about and involved in their children’s education.
3. Promote mainstream awareness of indigeneity within Latinx populations, and counter the misconception that Latinx people are a monolith.
4. Increase the amount of people in the United States who are proficient in both English and an Indigenous language, thus building bridges between future generations of IILAs and mainstream U.S. institutions.

Ultimately, this contributes to both the welfare of IILAs and to the efficacy and efficiency of U.S. organizations that seek to serve the diverse communities that compose America.

This brief is a joint publication from the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative and the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley

Citation

Almasalkhi, Nadia. 2021. "Indigenous Latinx Students: Visibility and Empowerment in the American School System." BIMI-Othering & Belonging Institute Policy Brief Series. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

Design & Layout

Al Nelson, Carlin Praytor, Nadia Almasalkhi

Contact

Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative
bimi@berkeley.edu
<https://bimi.berkeley.edu>

124 Moses Hall
Berkeley CA, 94720

About the Author

Nadia Almasalkhi is a BIMI Policy & Communications Fellow, a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow, and a PhD student in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include the experiences of Middle Eastern immigrants, social movements, and the politics of immigration law. Her current project focuses on the Syrian American diaspora.

Before entering graduate school, Nadia worked as a refugee resettlement casework intern, a legal assistant to immigration attorneys, and a research assistant investigating the effects of trauma on refugees resettled in the United States. She holds Bachelors degrees in International Studies and in Arabic & Islamic Studies, both from the University of Kentucky.