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### **Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Education**

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## **Zapotec Identity as a Matter of Schooling**

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### **Abstract**

Little research has been dedicated to Indigenous Mexican students' education and their sociocultural adaptation to U.S. schools, which includes their ethnic identity as significant to their schooling experiences. This study examines Zapotec-origin youth, original to the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, and how their Indigenous identity can positively impact their education. Often, educators have limited knowledge about Mexico's ethnoracial groups, presume that their Mexican students share indistinguishable characteristics, and are unaware that Indigenous students are ever-present in their classrooms. Through in-depth interviews, this study reveals how Zapotec high school students assert their Indigenous identity as a basis for developing viable approaches for their overall educational success.

*Keywords:* Indigenous education, Zapotec youth, secondary schooling, ethnic identity

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## **Introduction**

The Latinx population in California outpaces that of any other state; they also comprise the largest student demographic in the state's public-school system (California Department of Education, 2017-2018). Among them are immigrant, refugee, and bi-national students arriving with a variety of national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, including Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadoran, and many others. Due to globalization and immigration patterns, Indigenous Mexican families and their children have largely settled in California communities. Until recently, however, Latinx educational studies have focused on Latinx pan-ethnic and Mexican issues without taking into consideration the heterogeneity of these groups. One such group is the Indigenous or original populations of Mexico. The discrimination and marginalization that Indigenous people experience within Mexico is often reproduced within communities of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. (Fox, 2004; Minkoff-Zern, 2012; Pick, Wolfram, & López, 2011). Due to their marginalization, little is known about the social, cultural, or political experiences of Indigenous Mexican groups, particularly their education.

A growing body of work on Indigenous Mexican students draws attention to diverse student populations, their linguistic abilities, academics, and school acclimation (Martínez, 2018; Morales, 2016; Perez, Vásquez, & Buriel, 2016). This article examines fifteen Zapotec-origin youth's ethnolinguistic and cultural identity in the context of two high schools in Los Angeles; Zapotecs are people with socio-historic kinship to the original place of Tlacolula, Oaxaca. I use ethnic and ethnolinguistic identity theories with a Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell, Boj-Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017) representation in the backdrop to explain Indigenous identity formations and the quality of relationships that they forge. Ethnic identity is important to study since it can be crucial for encouraging meaningful school engagements and, by extension, important to creating successful educational pathways. To this end, teachers/educators and school agents can use information about their students' ethnic and cultural uniqueness to create learning conditions that accomplish student contributions. Further, it is my expectation that this article encourages discussion on how to inform educational practice and policy in support of Indigenous students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Sites of Learning**

Much of the work that concerns issues of Indigenous ethnic and cultural identity tends to center on Native peoples from the U.S., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand and explores how historical processes are shaped by settler colonialism; a practice of occupation and claim to native lands and resources (Saranillio, 2015; Whyte, 2016). Recently, however, scholars have put forth a hemispheric approach to indigeneity known as Critical Latinx Indigeneities that mark and unmark Mexican and Central American Indigenous identity formations, namely in the U.S., under parallel processes that navigate, straddle, and transcend multiple geographies and countries at diverse points-in-time. According to Blackwell et al. (2017) an important tenet of Critical Latinx Indigeneities is its proposition to endorse intricate, multilayered, and multilingual Indigenous ways of being across distinct ethnoracial boundaries. This includes Indigenous migrations from Latin America into the territories of U.S. Native Tribal lands (USA).

This study takes place at two public high schools in the ancestral homelands of the Gabrielino-Tongva. The first school is located a few miles west of Los Angeles on the 24-acre site built atop the springs of Kuruvungna or what is known in the Tongva language as “a place where we are in the sun.” The second school is located just a stone’s throw away from a green space named Tongva Park. These and other efforts to underscore Indigenous Los Angeles, such as the re-naming of Route 187 in Santa Monica to Moomat Ahiko Way or “breath of the ocean,” raise an intimate connection to water, land, and a people that reinvigorates Indigenous identity and language. According to Alvitre (2015), “Language is at the heart and soul of a worldview. Within the Tongva community, efforts to connect and renew language are active and very much alive, with at least two communities fully engaged in the language revitalization process” (p. 44). At the heart and intersection of Tongva lands, arrive and settle Indigenous Mexican migrants. After Mexico City, Los Angeles has become the city with the largest number of Indigenous Mexicans where the Zapotec population is estimated to reach 200,000 (Warman, 2001; Takash, Hinohosa-Ojeda, & Runsten, 2005).

### **Ethnic Identity and Immigration**

As many researchers have noted, immigration can play a role in activating ethnic identity awareness (Phinney, 2003; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006; Verkuyten, Drabbles, & Van den Nieuwenhuijzen, 1999). Bosma and Kunnen (2001) stated that the evolution of identity is likely to occur when individuals grow to recognize that the surrounding society’s beliefs, values, and norms are dissimilar to their own. Ethnic identity can be contingent upon

immigration as related to how the receiving culture views the ethnic group (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005; Liebkind, 2006). The literature often describes immigrants and their native-born descendants in terms of their ethnic group memberships rather than by individual attributes and unique personalities. Ethnicity-based ascription and stereotyping give rise to one's realization of the ethnic group to which he or she belongs to but, perhaps, has not been consciously aware of (Hecht et al., 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Research also suggests that immigrants' sociolinguistics (i.e., differentiation of language use according to a given social context) signify their identity management and cultural adaptation style. Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder's (2006) research on 1.5-immigrant youth (people born in another nation who must adapt to a new country's culture) in 13 countries (Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States) suggests that language knowledge and use are closely related to one's ethnic identity and cultural orientation. Other research has demonstrated similar relationships for second- and later-generation Mexican-Americans (Norris, Ford, & Bova, 1996). Ethnolinguistic identity theory (ELIT) posits that language represents a core aspect of one's social group identity, if not one's worldview (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Giles, Williams, Mackie, & Rosselli, 1995). One study revealed that, whereas Mexican-Americans generally viewed English and Anglo/European American culture as more vital than Spanish and Mexican-American culture, those who strongly identified with Mexican culture perceived the vitality of Spanish as higher than did their counterparts with weaker ethnic identification (Gao, Schmidt, & Gudykunst, 1994). Evans (1996) showed that Hispanic immigrant parents who believed in the vitality of the Mexican ethnic culture tended to transmit their cultural beliefs and Spanish to their children, which suggests a structural tie between youths' Mexican heritage ethnic identity and their language knowledge.

### **Indigenous Identity in Schools**

Recent studies are documenting the ways in which Indigenous students may seemingly forfeit or take on their identities due to unsettling or reassuring social and academic schooling experiences (Baquedano-López & Janetti, 2017; Machado-Casas, 2012; Perez et al., 2016). Ethnographic and mixed methods research in California have examined the educational experiences of Indigenous Oaxacan high school students to determine how recent Indigenous immigrants are received in school, to understand the relationship of discriminatory practices

and ethnic identity, and to uncover processes that promote or discourage Oaxacan social integration and academic achievement (Barillas-Chón, 2010; Gonzalez, 2018). Barillas-Chón (2010), for example, revealed how school peers referred to first generation Indigenous youth derogatorily as *bajitos* (low in stature) and *morenitos* (dark skinned) or characterized them as not speaking Spanish or English well and being “dumb.” Additional disparaging remarks such as *oaxaquita* (short Oaxacan) can take a toll on Indigenous Oaxacan first and second-generation immigrant students’ ethnoracial attitudes. Facing discrimination has some impact on endorsing assimilationist attitudes and accepting negative stereotypes, however, facing discrimination has also been reported to have a moderate but negative impact on students’ multicultural and inclusive attitudes—implying an unsuccessful adaptation to society (Gonzalez, 2018).

In a parallel manner, labeling Indigenous students as “dumb” and assuming that they are not “smart,” often reduce their meaningful linguistic and kinship practices and can have implications on their educational prospects. In Machado-Casas’ (2009) study of Indigenous mothers, Inez, an undocumented Otomí mother from Mexico, taught her son about the importance of English, Spanish, and Otomí for his schooling experience. Research suggests that Indigenous people are in tune with “smartness” through continuing knowledge transmissions facilitated by diasporic communities that engage purposeful ongoing connectedness to their homelands’ scientific, socio-cultural, spiritual, and language knowledge (Urrieta, 2016). For Indigenous Mexican students, traveling to and from their own and their parents’ hometowns and actively participating in local celebrations and developing peer-adult relationships often involve language brokering, supporting U.S. educational skills sets. These practices inform their formal education through learning of millennial agricultural and natural chemical process (Urrieta, 2016). Bartering, conducting currency exchange and other financial transactions that involve measurement and distance can creatively represent various mathematical techniques, statistical, and other analyses while language brokering allows Indigenous youth to draw on multiple semiotic systems for a variety of purposes in diverse contexts (Perez et al., 2016; Urrieta & Martínez, 2011; Urrieta, 2016). Moreover, Zapotec and Yucatec Mayan youth identity have shown to be influential to students’ academic achievement (Casanova, 2011; Vásquez, 2012).

## Methodology

Fifteen Zapotec high school students participated in an in-depth interview based on a 48-item interview protocol. All 15 interview transcripts were examined for self-reported ethnic identity, schooling experiences, and background characteristics; additionally, emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness) and cognitions (e.g., confusion, inattentiveness), as they pertained to ethnic identity and schooling, were carefully noted in the analysis. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant, school, teacher, and other party confidentiality. Participants provided assent (if under age 18) or consent (if over age 18) before they completed the interview. In addition, participants under age 18 were required to present parental consent. In total, interview participants consisted of 8 males and 7 females. In-depth interviews were chosen as a qualitative research method to allow interviewees to express opinions and ideas in their own words. The development of an interview protocol helped to focus the interview without locking the interviewer into a fixed set of questions, a rigid order, or specific wording. The primary goal for using an interview protocol was to balance the systematic collection of data with the flexibility needed to tap respondents' understanding.

### **Participants**

With the exception of four interviewees who were born in Mexico, all were born in the United States, in various cities of what today is known as Greater Los Angeles. Two Mexican nationals were born in Oaxacan municipalities: San Lucas Quiaviní and Tlacolula de Matamoros, and one was born in Mexico City. Three students attended Mexican schools, from elementary through middle school. Two students were U.S.-born nationals; however, they migrated to Mexico as children or early adolescents and spent significant parts of their lives there. One participant arrived in the U.S. three years before being interviewed. One participant belonged to a mixed-immigration-status family, where at least one member was a citizen living in the U.S. and another was undocumented. Almost all were fluent in English and Spanish. One student reported being able to write in Spanish "not very well" and another "not at all." Another reported being able to speak or write in Spanish "not very well." Only forty percent of students mentioned knowing Zapotec, including speaking, understanding, or a combination of both. Four students mentioned that they worked either part time, full time, or a combination of both. All youth reported having an average of two siblings. Table 1 presents participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	<u>Hometown from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico</u>	
			Mother	Father
Irene	Female	15	Tlacolula de Matamoros	Tlacolula de Matamoros
Yazmin	Female	—	La Ciéniga	La Ciéniga
Rosario	Female	15	Santa Ana del Valle	Santa Ana del Valle
Jose	Male	16	Santa Ana del Valle	Tetela de Ocampo, Puebla
Pedro	Male	—	Tlacolula de Matamoros	Tlacolula de Matamoros
Nayeli	Female	17	San Lucas Quiavini	San Lucas Quiavini
Yadira	Female	—	La Ciéniga	La Ciéniga
Alex	Male	14	Tlacolula de Matamoros	Santiago Apóstol
Melissa	Female	—	San Lucas Quiavini	San Lucas Quiavini
Fernando	Male	16	San Lucas Quiavini	San Lucas Quiavini
Marco	Male	14	Tlacolula de Matamoros	Acapulco, Guerrero
Lucas	Male	16	San Lucas Quiavini	San Lucas Quiavini
Edgar	Male	—	Tlacolula de Matamoros	--
Eddy	Male	15	Oaxaca	Unión Hidalgo
Gloria	Female	18	Mexico City	Oaxaca

Note. Dash represents missing or unreported data.

## Findings

### Ethnic Identity

**Mexican and Mexican-Americans.** Research has shown that many Mexican youth express strong ties to their culture of origin and often have a high sense of Mexican pride. Studies have found that strong ethnic ties are important to adolescents' well-being, can serve to counter stereotyping, and facilitate school success (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Keefe, 1992; Phinney, 1989, 1993; Rotheram & Phinney, 1987). In this study, all students expressed a sense of ethnic identity. Students considered their Mexican identity to be integral to their sense of self and provided explanations as to why they considered themselves as such.

Mexican heritage students such as Rosario and Fernando took a “hyphenated approach” to their ethnic identity. A hyphenated approach is a reference to an ethnicity combined with the name of the country of residence. Rosario stated that she is Mexican-American “because of where my family is from, they’re from Mexico and I was born in America, so Mexican-American.” Alex specified the need to identify Mexican as something that set him apart from other Latinx:

Sometimes, some people would be like, they would ask you are you Guatemalan or Salvadoran or from other part of Central America, and then if you just want to keep it general, you can just say no, I’m Mexican, and that’s how you would know.

Interestingly, Mexican-born students were quick to mention their identity as such. However, as opposed to their U.S.-born peers, Mexican-born students did not use hyphenated ethnic identity labels such as Mexican-American. For example, Edgar stated, “I like saying I’m Mexican.” Nayeli discussed how she indicates her ethnic identity when filling out questionnaires, exams, and other documents. Because Mexican was never an ethnic identity option, Nayeli previously resorted to the Latino/a category, stating, “On any application that they ask for ethnic background, I would always [write] Latino/Latina.” However, she clarified her preference for identifying as Mexican when given the opportunity to do so. “Just recently, last year, I circled other and I put Mexican.” According to Nayeli, because many forms do not categorize Mexican, she now selects the “other” category and writes in Mexican. Jose emphasized his ethnic pride:

I just feel really proud of being Mexican . . . and it helps me stay on top of things . . . I want to show everybody else that we are strong people, we’re smart people.

Everybody has that stereotype mentality and I want to prove them all wrong. I can beat White students and then I get proud of being in my class and just saying I know I’m smarter than that [White] student and I’m Mexican and I have more trouble and I have more responsibilities than they’ll have.

Jose not only presents his Mexican heritage as integral but also associable to his school success. He feels that being Mexican fueled his competitiveness. He also felt that he had more responsibilities and faced greater life obstacles than did his White counterparts.

**Oaxacans.** All students considered themselves Oaxacan and being Oaxacan was an important part of their ethnic identity. Most students spoke at length about what it means for

them to be Oaxacan and shared anecdotes about foods, culture, and patron saint festivities as related to their Oaxacan identity.

Although Nayeli clearly affirmed her Mexican identity, she also distinguished herself as Oaxacan, stating, “But when I’m asked what part of Mexico or where I’m from, I’ve always said Oaxaca. I usually don’t say Mexico; I mention Oaxaca first.” Further, she spoke about what it means to be Oaxacan:

It’s cool! No I’m just kidding [laughing]. I don’t I just . . . I have a [lot] of cousins who are kinda I don’t know if it’s like . . . there’s some kind like resistance for them to say, “I’m Oaxacan.” I’m proud of being Oaxaca a *oaxaqueña*; I’m proud and I’m not . . . after hearing like how we’re like the minorities in Mexico or, I don’t know, like, the system has been kinda unfair to us *me das más orgullo*.

Nayeli’s *orgullo*, or pride, was clearly evident. She felt proud of the traditional celebrations such as weddings, and she emphasized her rich Oaxacan culture by describing the ways that Oaxacans dress, speak, and live. She noted that Oaxacan culture is rooted in Indigenous customs and traditions, including Indigenous healings such as *curando de susto* or curing of fright.

Edgar, is originally from the Zapotec pueblo of Tlacolula de Matamoros in the Central Valley of Oaxaca and immigrated to the U.S. at a young age. To him Oaxacan means:

It means to be, you know, the culture’s still there, because over here, even though we’re in Los Angeles, we try to do the best we can to still maintain the culture, like the *Guelaguetza* and the foods, you know, they try to make it natural.

In addition, he explained that his family, specifically, his aunts, uncles, and mother, still maintain pride in being Oaxacan. Although Edgar’s family mostly speaks Spanish, they have pride in the Zapotec language from Tlacolula. Edgar, however, did not learn the language.

Oaxacan identity, as suggested by Edgar, is often anchored by immigrants and their children who often distinctly maintain real and imagined connections and commitments to their homeland and recognize themselves and act as a collective community through a range of socio-religious and other public expressions. Although Edgar recalls little from his community of origin and has not been back since his childhood, he is surrounded by culture and tradition by way of his mother’s occupation as an employee in a well-known Oaxacan restaurant which lines its walls with memoirs of his home community and the Zapotec civilization. His connection to his identity is, in part, informed by a state-based yet southern-regional identity that implies a

densely Indigenous and impoverished region (Telles, 2014). Other interviewees like Marco who had not traveled to Oaxaca, for example, revealed that being Oaxacan involves the celebration of patron saints and Virgins, “because they’re holy to us; they’re the ones that help us every single day, surviving to get a job, work, driving, getting your clothes, everything.” During the summers, Alex enjoys spending time at his mother’s pueblo of Tlacolula and his dad’s pueblo of Santiago Apóstol, where he gets to experience various festivities. Oaxacan youth identity transpires through meaningful relationships to their self-worth, independent of national-origin.

Yazmin embraced her Mexican identity and gave great significance to Oaxacan identity: Even if I’m not from Oaxaca, I’m like, oh, yeah, I’m from Oaxaca, you know. My parents are from Oaxaca; why shouldn’t I be, too? I’ve always wanted to identify myself with a simp [sic] not simpler culture but a more, I don’t know, how you say it, friendly? No, no. I don’t know how to describe it, but a place where they don’t try to overcomplicate things and where family is the most important, so that’s what I liked, so that’s what I want to identify myself with.

Yazmin has strong feelings about national and pan-ethnic identities, such as Mexican and Hispanic, viewing them as too “broad.” Moreover, she feels that U.S. society is wasteful and that Americans are preoccupied with meaningless issues to the extent that, ideally, she would rather live in Oaxaca, where she feels that life and culture are much simpler and where she can exercise her future political profession. In addition, Yazmin stated that, although she does not look like the typical *oaxaqueña*, she grew up in a pueblo in Oaxaca, living a simpler life, and that her grandparents and others in her pueblo are neither vain nor selfish. She noted that she enjoys the simple nature of her Oaxacan pueblo and family.

Resisting Oaxacan identity subscription and not looking like the “typical *oaxaqueña*” as indicated by Nayeli and Yazmin, invokes a colonial past that classified Spanish, Indigenous, and African racial phenotypes and that of their intermixing into a compare and contrast taxonomy of self-proclaimed Spanish superiority over inferior Indigenous, African, and their mestizo and mulatto offspring (Banks, 2005). This persistent racialized view renders skin color-to-geographic discrimination where people classified as dark skinned are likelier than other skin tones to perceive racial discrimination, an observation most visible in Mexico’s South-Southwest region that include states like Oaxaca where large segments of Indigenous and Afro descendents reside (Telles, 2014). Taken together, the byproduct of colonization can illustrate a

transcendence of a racio-spatiality that downpours in U.S. society through the Indigenous namesake of “*oaxaquita*,” “*oaxaco*,” or “*oaxac*,” heightening a racio-spatial marker pursuant of colonialism, unbound by genesis or geography (Perez et al., 2016; Sanchez, 2018; Vásquez, 2012). Embedding Yazmin’s statement into the colonial legacy gives significant meaning to her atypical Oaxacan look and further re-emerges in the interview when she describes an incident where her father’s Oaxacan identity is scrutinized by someone else for his “light skinned” complexion because he does not fit the stereotyped Oaxacan. Despite this conveyed Mexican-origin ethnoracial narrative, Yazmin upholds her identity while disrupting the Oaxacan resemblance.

**Zapotecs.** Zapotecs are modern-day descendants of Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples who originated from the Mexican state of Oaxaca and who inhabit the Central Valley, Northern and Southern Sierra, and Isthmus regions (Acosta Márquez, 2007). Zapotecs are overwhelmingly located in the Central Valley region of the state, adjacent to Oaxaca City, the capital. According to the 2010 Mexican census, Zapotecs comprised a total of 371,740, representing the majority of the Indigenous population in the central region area (INEGI, 2010). Zapotecs are mainly situated in the district of Tlacolula, where 62.2% of the population above 5 years of age speaks Zapotec (Coronel Ortiz, 2006).

All interviewees were heritage Zapotecs, specifically from the Central Valley region of Oaxaca. With the exception of one student, all interviewees had heard of the word Zapotec. The interviews revealed two main findings in which Zapotec identity was expressed: through ethnic identity and language acquisition. In the former, however, most students did not explicitly identify as Zapotec. Some were unsure whether they were Zapotec, three explicitly spoke about their Zapotec identity, and others did not identify themselves as Zapotec. Pedro, Jose, Edgar, Melissa, and Eddy did not clearly state nor deny a Zapotec identity; yet, they defined the meaning of Zapotec. For instance, Pedro stated, “Being *zapoteco* is more like a group, and Oaxacan is more like a state.” He added that being Zapotec is unique based on the way that Zapotecs live. Similarly, Jose explained:

Zapotecs have their own ways; it’s a separate thing. People from Mexico act differently than you do in other places, so, like in this place, like when you hear *zapoteco*, it’s like you imagine people who are old ‘cause it’s more [sic], and then they’re conservative and

in their thoughts and their beliefs, and they're really caring and you just could imagine things there [in Oaxaca], it's different than like the rest of the people.

Essentially, Jose distinguished Zapotec culture from traditional Mexican culture, thinking that Zapotecs dress differently and are "old school" compared to Mexicans. Melissa noted that Zapotecs are "people that lived way back then, and it is like part of a place in Oaxaca or Mexico." Similarly, Irene stated:

It's from this tribe from a long time ago where I was like . . . Zapotecs created their own words [that] are different than Spanish; the way they say it, well, they have different . . . they don't have different cultures, but I mean they do things differently . . . they're Oaxacans, also, but they have it differently, so, yeah, I don't really know.

Eddy mentioned that it is appropriate to call someone Zapotec based on his or her town of origin. He said, "They call them [Zapotecs] like, I don't know 'cause, I guess, like someone you know, you'd call them that 'cause it's like they're from the same place you are."

Lucas not only mentioned that he is Zapotec but also that he is proud of his Indigenous identity. He stated, "Sí" (yes) because, "*La verdad no sé; es que eso [zapoteco] viene desde nuestros antepasados, entonces nos quedamos con eso. Es un orgullo*" (In reality, I don't know, that [Zapotec] comes from our ancestors so that stays with us, it is prideful). Rosario also considered herself Zapotec, but not completely. She was not sure whether she could fully embrace her Zapotec identity, stating, "I'd say half [laugh] because I understand it; I don't know [laugh]." Finally, Yazmin wanted to consider herself Zapotec and explained:

I want to believe I am [Zapotec], you know. I sometimes I don't feel like it because I live here and I lead such a very different cultural life. But whenever I do get into contact with some part of that, like when we went to Oaxaca and I saw a little bit of that or . . . for Thanksgiving we went to have it [Thanksgiving] with a bunch of people that, I guess, you can say who were from Oaxaca and they would speak in that [Zapotec] language, and I really wanted to learn how to speak it. But my mom was like, "Part of our family, they forgot how to speak it," and I was like, "So there's nobody that can teach us anymore?" and I felt really sad when she said, "Yeah, there's nobody, really."

Two students were hesitant to explicitly identify as Zapotec, although their interviews revealed that they and their immediate family members were fluent in Zapotec. For Nayeli, the term Zapotec was new, and she was not aware that Zapotec was considered an ethnic identity.

A week before the interview, while attending an Indigenous Oaxacan graduate student panel at a local university, Nayeli was introduced to the idea of Zapotec:

I actually don't know 'cause I don't know what Zapo [sic], that was something new I learned on Saturday. I didn't understand when the professor introduced the first set of panelists as *mixtecos* . . . and then he introduced the second set as . . . *zapotecos*.

Nayeli grew up thinking that *zapoteco* was a *dialecto* (dialect), and, although she speaks Zapotec, she never considered her identity to be Zapotec. Similarly, although Irene was a Zapotec speaker, she did not seem comfortable with using Zapotec as an ethnic identifier. She explained, "I don't really know because I don't really speak it [Zapotec] as much as other people. But one thing for sure is, I'm more Mexican, but I don't really know about *zapoteco*."

The articulation of Zapotec identity based on a shared community of origin and as being distinct from Mexican culture is encompassed by formal and non-formal Indigenous knowledges ranging from tending to land to healing practices which are transmitted from one generation to the next. Additionally, these knowledges have localized content and meaning that are highly people-, land-, and nation-specific (unrelated to nation-states) and that embody *familia*, *pueblo*, and *comunidad* (Urrieta & Martínez, 2011). Despite the literal Spanish to English language translation of these words, for example, *familia* often invokes intense committed, dynamic, and malleable relationships. Although the *Guelaguetza* is commonly known as a dance festival, in the Zapotec language, *guelaguetza* refers to a localized autonomous and self-governing system of structured reciprocity for the benefit of the greater community (Coronel Ortiz, 2006). These social structures can nurture the conditions of self-awareness and belonging to a specific group.

A second notable way in which students talked about Zapotec was through language. Most spoke about the idea of Zapotec as primarily a language. Four students stated that they did not know Zapotec; however, four others spoke or understood Zapotec to some degree. For Rosario, being Zapotec was contingent upon her ability to speak the language. According to her:

Oaxacans speak *zapoteco*, which is like they pretty much in that region speak *zapoteco*, but they speak their own different versions of *zapoteco*, which is pretty cool because it's a dialect and it's kind of dying down, so, I mean, I'm able to understand it, which is pretty interesting; and my brothers and sisters, they can't understand it at all.

Rosario also mentioned that her parents intentionally spoke Zapotec at home as a way to teach her and her siblings the language. “Oh, my brother and sister, when, um, my dad tells my sister, like, ‘Go get the broom,’ but he says it in *zapoteco*, and my sister is like, ‘What? What?’”

Rosario learned Zapotec by listening to her parents’ conversations.

Similarly, although Melissa’s parents did teach her Zapotec, she stated, “It’s just that I don’t say it right.” She does, however, understand it. Her father spoke to her in Zapotec, but she found herself replying in English or Spanish. For Melissa, the Zapotec language is “good, too, because . . . it’s a tradition . . . the people from where you’re from know it [Zapotec], and it’s something very special.” For others such as Irene, Lucas, and Nayeli, Zapotec was their first language. All three were forthcoming in discussing their native language. Irene stated, “My first language was *zapoteco*, and my second language was Spanish, and my third was English. We usually just talk more in Spanish or *zapoteco* in my house.” Lucas mentioned that he learned Spanish in Mexico when he began formal schooling and that English came later, once he arrived in the U.S. In addition, he talked about the richness and diversity of Zapotec:

*Sí, porque, la verdad, allá en Oaxaca, hay muchos pueblos que hablan zapoteco, hay muchos pueblos que están alrededor de Oaxaca y hablan puro zapoteco, pero son diferentes zapotecos, tienen diferentes, cómo se llama . . . diferentes sonidos, diferentes significados* [Yes, because, in reality, over there in Oaxaca, there are many pueblos who speak Zapotec, there are many pueblos that surround Oaxaca, and they only speak Zapotec, but they are different Zapotecs, they have different, how do you say . . . different sounds, different meanings].

Nayeli, who is completely fluent in Zapotec, spoke about her Zapotec language use and depicted how she and her mother always spoke Zapotec in public:

I think that’s one thing my mom my parents have; like, “Be proud of where you’re from.” I have some family who they kinda, like, not embarrassed but they try not to speak *zapoteco* out in public. Oh, my mom, she’s like, “No, that’s what we speak, that’s what you’re going to.” Like, on the bus we’re always being asked, “Oh, that’s not Spanish. I’m sorry, what language is that that you’re speaking?” Oh, and we answer, um, ‘cause we speak *zapoteco* everywhere, like on the bus and anywhere in public. Where my mom’s like, “Don’t be ashamed of who you are, don’t be ashamed of who you are.” I just, I don’t know; it’s just like being Indigenous, it’s ‘cause Oaxacans, I guess, we are

Indigenous and, like, just the whole idea of being Indigenous . . . has that connotation where they're less, kind of.

Unlike Nayeli, other students neither understood nor spoke Zapotec, but some of their parents or grandparents did. Although Zapotec fluency differed across families, and students generally acknowledged the loss of the Zapotec language, many demonstrated their willingness to learn the language if given the opportunity to do so. Eddy mentioned that he had heard his father speak Zapotec with his friends, "Yeah, like, sometimes I've heard him speak it", but his mother did not speak Zapotec. Pedro also noted that his father speaks Zapotec and that his mother does not understand the language. Although the use of Zapotec was limited in his home, Pedro showed an interest in learning: "Cause sometimes I go there [to Oaxaca] . . . I want to understand what they are saying and speak with them." Similarly, Yazmin hoped to learn Zapotec and expressed disappointment when she learned that none of her family members knew Zapotec. She stated, "Yeah, they don't speak the language connected to that one [Zapotec] anymore, so I felt really sad that none of my family anymore can speak it or speak a language similar to that."

Mexican society leads a double posture that strains Indigenous people to not lose their "dying" languages when in fact their language rights are socially and institutionally violated (Hamel, 2008). Although Indigenous languages are constitutionally protected these hold unequal power relationships against Spanish and English; the government mainly officiates in Spanish and only selectively permits Indigenous languages to preside over special events such as international mother language day. Moreover, the way that Mexican-born and U.S. born students refer to the Zapotec language as a *dialecto* or dialect throughout the interviews, illustrates the deceptive way that languages are considered dialects since "different," non-dominant groups, are primarily situated in language as a vehicle for the representation of selves and others (Despaigne, 2010; Pennycook 1998). The representation of the Indian other has, since colonization, been both an emblematic and pragmatic method to subjugate Indigenous languages and peoples that has arguably garnered strength since Mexico's national identity building, uplifting mestizo identity and allowing youth to emphasize Zapotec identity as a people of the past and deemphasize Zapotec language as proper. However, the yearning of learning Zapotec among diasporic youth may support Indigenous approaches that interrupt and transform the ideological legacy of Indigenous languages (Meek & Messing, 2007).

## **Teachers' Understanding of Oaxacan Students**

Students were asked if they thought that teachers understood what it means to be Oaxacan and most stated, "No." Nayeli went into some detail about how teachers were unaware of their Oaxacan students:

I don't think so 'cause they [teachers] would never . . . I am pretty sure we shared in the beginning of the year when we fill out "all about me" forms where we're from, like, specifically what country, I mean, what state or country. I was never asked by a teacher, "Oh, you're from Oaxaca, like, oh, how is? . . . tell me about your culture." Or when I would tell them that I spoke three languages, it was never like, "Ohh, so Oaxaca, like, tell us more about it." Like, it was never . . . I think again we did have some instances where we were like, "That teacher doesn't like us; she's racist," but it was never because we're Mexican, that's why she [the teacher] doesn't like us.

Nayeli noted that teachers were oblivious to her Oaxacan identity and she simply accused some teachers of being racist even though she did not show evidence of it. Others did not mention that they perceived their teachers as racist, but Edgar felt that teachers think of Oaxacans as essentially the same as other Latinx. "They [teachers] probably . . . just see them the same, you know. Like, the Latino type; they probably see them, like, . . . the same."

Jose sensed that teachers have some understanding of what it means to be Oaxacan. He felt that this was due to there being a critical mass of Oaxacans at his high school:

A lot of teachers are aware, too, 'cause, I mean, we're, like, a good group [sic], we have a good, a good number of students who are Oaxacan. So, yeah, they talk to their teachers about it, and the teachers are aware of some things.

Jose added that it is good for teachers to know about their Oaxacan students because it creates a connection. When students determine that teachers understand what it means to be Oaxacan, it increases their self-worth. Alex mentioned that some teachers understand what it means to be Oaxacan simply because these teachers are Hispanic:

They [teachers] know the different states of Mexico and how different cultures can be different from one another but how sometimes they can be similar. So if you're, like, Oaxacan, that would be like a certain type of culture, and that's how they [teachers] would know.

Alex explained how he knew that some teachers are aware of Oaxacan culture. “Well, sometimes, if we’re reading a textbook, they [teachers] would mention Oaxaca and how, like, back then, they would have there the ancient Mexicans and all that, how they live, and we would learn about different parts of Mexico.” Later, he explained how learning about Oaxacan culture in class “makes you feel good that you know about your history.” He also stated, “Internally, you know that they [teachers] are talking about your great ancestors, so you feel that you kind of know what the teacher is talking about ‘cause you can relate to it.” At various points during the interview with Yazmin, she detailed how two of her teachers were supportive of her culture:

My Spanish teacher did at least [understand what it means to be Oaxacan]. And there’s another girl here at school, too, [who is Oaxacan], so when we had . . . there’s two Spanish teachers that I’ve had, and one of them, when I told her, like, what my project was when I presented it, she was like, “Oh, wow, it’s a really pretty culture,” like, not just pretty but beautiful and interesting, to say the least, and she really liked it, and she’s like,

“It’s sad to see that a lot of these things aren’t out for the public to see.” And my other teacher knew about it [Zapotec culture], I guess, ‘cause he’s traveled to Mexico, he was born there. And he was like, “Yeah, that’s a really beautiful culture.” And when he found out that, of all the students he’s had, only two of them were ever descended from people from Oaxaca, he was like, “Wow, that’s kind of sad.”

Yazmin also noted that she experienced excitement when she was able to share her Zapotec heritage in class. She also spoke about the support of her Spanish teacher and the interest in Zapotec culture that was generated in her classmates:

I actually did a project on that [Zapotecs]. And I really wanted the teacher to give me that one [class project] and she did ‘cause it’s actually part of our background, our cultural background, where my family, my mom, once talked about how her family was descendent from that [Zapotec culture] at some point, and my dad was, too, but on a lesser extent. I did a really big project on them [Zapotecs] and about their life, and I believe, wasn’t Monte Albán part of their city? Yeah . . . and we went there once, and I was like, wow. They were smarter than people here at the time [giggle].

Yazmin once made a dish similar to *pozole*, or maize stew, as a tribute to her Zapotec heritage, which greatly affected her teacher and which generated peer interest and curiosity. Her teacher was surprised by the diversity of cultures in Mexico. Irene noted how many teachers in her school understood what it means to be Oaxacan:

I guess one out of, like, 40 [teachers] because some have gone over there and actually visit Oaxaca and they know some cultures, especially Spanish teachers, they know some parts over there and what the foods are like and the, uh, visiting it, so.

She also explained that teachers who visited Oaxaca said great things about it, e.g., “It’s really nice; they have good cultures, good food, and it’s really nice.”

Although it is not clear how the teacher might have structured the classroom assignment, when Yazmin presented her Zapotec and *pozole* project, she had the liberty to do her own investigative work in preparation for her project. Giving Indigenous students the freedom to substantially engage their own ancestral cultures, knowledge systems, and institutional schooling contexts may play an important role in creating culturally relevant resources (Urrieta, 2016). Ancestral understandings of student ethnic groups increase positive feelings which appear to convert into improved educational participation. Therefore, students’ perceptions of teacher responsiveness to their millennial culture present a reasonable relationship to enhancing educational opportunity (Luna, Evans, & Davis, 2013). Presenting a unit on Indigenous peoples of the Americas or “ancient Mexicans,” as Alex narrated, may be one approach to introduce material on the subject. Alberto’s (2017) account reported that the presentation of a map or “an alternative imaging of the Americas” (p. 247), was a significant bridge that connected her Zapotec Yalateca identity to her school classmates and curriculum. As such, it is important for schools to create spaces whereby Indigenous migrants and non-migrants can engage in collective action and cultural sustenance; to open up discourses and actions in which social identities are created and re-created through the institutionalization of practices where immigrants are recognized as Oaxacans and as Indigenous people. These diverse collective practices generate recognition of cultural, social, and political identities (Rivera-Salgado, 2005).

## **Discussion**

There are two indicators that predict Indigenous ethnic identity: ethnolinguistic identity, and the absence of Indigenous labels; both are related to Indigenous ethnic identity formation

found in Oaxaca's Central Valley. Overall, school children and youth in Mexico do not self-identify as Indigenous or with an ethnolinguistic identity and are well aware of Indigenous linguistic prejudice (López-Gopar, 2009; O'Donnell, 2010). Researchers who conducted studies in Mexico with Zapotec heritage school children also considered these students to be Indigenous solely based on their Zapotec linguistic capabilities or lack thereof (López-Gopar, 2009). In Zapotec communities of the Central Valley, it is common to find people referring to themselves as *paisanos* or community members, rather than members of an ethnoracial group. In addition, Zapotecs may use pueblos of origin as distinguishable markers. For instance, someone might be called *bartoleño* to signal an individual's membership to the San Bartolomé Quialana pueblo. The word Zapotec is not used to reference community members by the same community or other Zapotec communities. Zapotecs make mention of their language in *castellano* or Spanish by describing it as *idioma* and *dialecto*, literally meaning language and dialect. The word Zapotec is absent in these communities and usage of the label has been largely adopted by anthropologists, linguists, and government officials.

The youth interviewed for this study based their Zapotec identity on their Indigenous language speaking abilities. Youth who expressed that they spoke, at one time spoke, or who understood Zapotec were likely to identify as Zapotec. The youth who had only limited speaking skills in Zapotec felt that they were only part Zapotec, based on this limitation. Others did not identify with or felt that they could not be Zapotec because they did not speak the language nor had family who could teach them. Although Zapotec ethnic identity seems to be related to Zapotec speaking abilities, even high levels of speaking ability do not always activate Indigenous ethnic identity. One youth struggled with considering herself Zapotec, even though she was born in a Zapotec-speaking community, was taught to be proud of her Zapotec language, and spoke Zapotec in public. Therefore, when inquiring with youth about Zapotec identity, mixed results were reported and in some cases youth adopted *dialecto* to be synonymous with Zapotec language. Further, the limited number of studies on Zapotecs in the U.S. do not suggest that Zapotecs self-identify with such labels (Smith, 1995).

Although the youth largely did not identify as Zapotec, they expressed great importance to their Indigenous Oaxacan identity. Youth associated Oaxacan identity with being Indigenous because it is rooted in Indigenous customs and traditions. In addition to participating in various heritage festivities, youth participated in their high school's activities and cultural groups that

promoted Oaxacan customs that reinforced and strengthened their identity. Cultural groups are composed of first and second generation youth, which explains why Indigenous Oaxacan identity is strong for youth. Cultural groups can serve to ensure that Oaxacan identity is passed on to future generations. Finally, many youths who were interviewed revealed that Oaxacan identity is more vital than Mexican and Mexican-American culture and in some cases Oaxacan youth felt the need to prove their identity when its authenticity was challenged by a Oaxacan peer.

All together, findings illustrated that Zapotec youth captured a wide variety of ethnic identities that interrupted bicultural models or models that confine identity by two distinct cultures that are at times infused to create a third “reality.” False identity dichotomies like biculturalism do not begin to capture the full extent of multicultural identities that have been previously absent. Importantly, identities like Oaxacan that are unrelated to the array of Mexican or U.S. identities, are meaningful to youths’ sense of self and cultural orientation. Youth may use several self-labels such as Mexican-American, Oaxacan, or even Zapotec which are not only telling of the great racioethnic diversity of students in U.S. schools, but importantly serve as factors that play a role in the schooling experiences of youth.

Youth’s Oaxacan identity was presumably more accessible than Zapotec but, importantly, determined when youth found themselves in social contexts that tolerated and embraced Oaxacan identity. According to interviewees, the degree to which Oaxacan youth chose to affirm their ethnic label varied upon perceiving favorable social conditions for their identity. Alternatively, unfavorable disparaging of Oaxacans indicates that Indigenous identity is at least partially and implicitly informed by youths’ acknowledgement of the negative enduring colonial ancestral undertone. Irrespective of ethnoracial boundaries, Zapotec youth articulate how “the system” is unfair to them and how Indigenous people are stratified as “less,” perpetuating the longstanding anti-Indigenous bias that is mediated by popular discourse. This gives rise to stereotypes based on the past that re-emerge in the presence of a stereotyped group, i.e., Oaxacans are *bajitos* and *morenitos*, evoking stigma and possible identity forfeiture. It is apparent, then, that the process by which the youth indicated a Zapotec and Oaxacan identity is complex and multilayered.

## Conclusion

Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell et al., 2017), as a hemispheric approach to understanding indigeneity, helps to uncover the colonial systemic experiments of “education” that have served to rid Indigenous people of their “savagery” and to dispose them of their lands whether by complete eradication or assimilationist projects. Paradoxically, Indigenous youth continue to find ways to retain and enhance heritage connections by engaging in significant cultural activities such as powwows, *Guelaguetzas*, sweat lodges, music groups, familial ceremonies, and other practices (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013; Kenyon & Carter, 2011; Schweigman, Soto, Wright, & Unger, 2011). Community members and parents often socialize youth into these practices as strategies to keep traditions alive; overall supporting youths’ pro-social behaviors, self-determination, and community belonging (Mesinas & Perez, 2016). In schools, although some teachers express empathy for Indigenous students by highlighting the great Indigenous civilizations in their curricula, it is imperative to make purposeful instructional and institutional opportunities that value Indigenous lives, not by generalizing a narrative of European “discovery” and Indigenous “fidelity” that evades the role of race and racial equity that continues to play-out; now transposed as a socio-economic hierarchy, but instead move toward teacher and school awareness of Indigenous youths’ strengths to facilitate sociocultural lives responsibly. A case in point lies in a mural across from Tongva Park that depicts five men “gathered at a fresh water stream: a friar in Franciscan cowl and two Spanish conquistadors face two Native American men in loincloths, one seated and the other kneeling, both sipping water from the stream” (McGahan, 2017, para. 3). While the underlying content may be contested, it is important to address Indigenous ethnoracial awareness in schools given that it provides an opportunity to redress colonialist Indigenous education and gives teachers the ability to make a significant impact on students’ lives.

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