INVISIBLE STUDENTS AND MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES: THE
ARTICULATION OF IDENTITY AMONG MIXTECO YOUTH IN SAN
DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

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Invisible Students and Marginalized Identities: The Articulation of Identity
among Mixteco Youth in San Diego, California

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the Mixteco families of Linda Vista who so graciously opened up their homes and hearts to me. Nydive’endo.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Invisible Students and Marginalized Identities: The Articulation of Identity among Mixteco Youth in San Diego, California

by

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Master of Arts in Latin American Studies
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This thesis focuses on the issue of identity, and how historical factors and personal experiences at school and in the larger community affect the process of identification of Mixteco youth growing up in San Diego. Mixtecos are an indigenous group from Mexico, primarily from the state of Oaxaca. The absence of jobs, lack of basic services, and the industrialization of agriculture have forced many Mixtecos to leave their hometowns in search of employment alternatives in the United States, which has often resulted in the permanent dislocation from their home.

With the permanent establishment of Mixteco communities in the US, Mixteco children grow up in an environment very different to that of their parents. They attend school, learn English, and lose their native language in the process. This research provides evidence that the lack of cultural and linguistic understanding on behalf of the school system has powerful effects on the development of a child’s identity but more importantly, it is the historical discrimination against indigenous people in Mexico that pervades across the border and continues to shape the identities of Mixteco indigenous youth living in the United States.

This research closely examines the experiences and narratives of Mixteco youth growing up in a San Diego. The ethnographic data is composed of participant observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with children of Mixteco migrants currently enrolled in K-12 public school, young adults who previously attended public school in San Diego, and Mixteco parents living in San Diego.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Migration has impacted all levels of Mixteco life, creating economic and social changes that have had an effect on the way in which they experience their indigenous identity, and resulting in new ways of negotiating and articulating their identity. Mixtecos are an indigenous group from southern Mexico and broadly encompass the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. Poverty, and its subsequent outcomes, has plagued Mixtecos and other indigenous groups for generations. The absence of jobs, lack of basic services, and the erosion of land in the Mixteca region have forced many Mixtecos to leave their hometowns in search of other employment opportunities. While previous generations migrated seasonally within Oaxaca, the increased industrialization of agriculture due to policies like NAFTA forced Mixtecos to leave their hometowns on a more permanent basis. Today, they leave in search of employment alternatives and resources that can sustain their families even though this may result in a permanent dislocation from their home. While some of the migration has been internal to Mexico (Cohen 2004), since the early 1980s, California has become a primary destination for many Mixtecos (Cohen 2004; Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Stephen 2007).

MIXTECO TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY

Many scholars argue that indigenous migrants reinforce their identity through migration as a result of the removal from their home, they seek others like them in their new location who may be from different communities or regions, and the new environments that
not only provide for a different understanding of themselves but also may provide new parameters from which to articulate their identities (Besserer 1998; Kearney 1991, 2000; Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Velasco Ortiz 2002). Mixteco migrants in the U.S. have established a transnational space that has cultural and political dynamics different from Mexico. Anthropologist Michael Kearney suggested that transnational migration gave Mixtecos greater opportunities to “elaborate cultural expressions of themselves as indigenous peoples that are distinct from the standard definitions and expressions of indigenous identity in Mexico” (2000:174). Indigenous-led organizations have also emerged from this transnational space created by Mixteco migrants and have served as a vehicle for the continued challenges of political and cultural definitions of what it means to be indigenous.

Kearney’s research, which focused on first generation Mixteco migrants, leaves open the question of how a history of migration shapes the lives of children who are born to Mixteco migrants, particularly to families who do not speak the new majority language but rather, an indigenous language of another nation. This becomes especially relevant in a nation such as the United States that continues to struggle with racist ideologies that manifest as class differentials and that produce unequal access to education, health care, employment, housing, and other basic social services. The presence of such inequalities remains visible inside the classroom because the school often serves as a mirror to society (Brittain 2002:5). The permanent establishment of Mixteco communities in the U.S. has resulted in generations of Mixteco children with childhood experiences very different from their parents’ childhood. They attend schools with very different lessons of history and society, learn English, and often times lose their native language in the process. Mixteco children, like many other culturally diverse students in the U.S. school system, face cultural discontinuities between
home and school that greatly affect the negotiation of their identity (Brittain 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 1995; Crawford 1992; Cummins 1996, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas 1995). While there is much research about various culturally diverse groups in the U.S. and in the public school system, including Mexican and Chicano students, it is imperative in this research to distinguish the experiences of indigenous Mexican children from the experiences of “Latino” or “Hispanic” students. The historical marginalization and discrimination of indigenous groups within Mexico and Mexican society remains significantly relevant to the experiences of Mexican indigenous people now living in the United States. Thus, the experiences of Mixteco children would not necessarily reflect the experiences of the generalized Latino population or that of a Mexican mestizo student.

This research seeks to assess whether the children of Mixteco migrants living in San Diego, California are actually developing and experiencing what Kearney (2000) has called “successful subnational indigenous identities.” I seek to answer the following:

1. Based on the experiences within the classroom and larger communities, how do Mixteco youth negotiate their identity in San Diego?

2. Secondly, how do Mixteco children develop their identity against the backdrop of an already existing Mexican mestizo identity?

It was from these questions that my research emerged and the interviews, conversations and participant observations reflect my attempt to articulate the experiences of Mixteco youth in San Diego, California.

**WHY THIS RESEARCH?**

My life experiences as a bilingual woman of color have definitely fueled my desire to address various forms of discrimination. I was born in Merced, California and straddled two nations as my childhood consisted of moving between Merced and Acapulco, my mother’s hometown. I came across various challenges as I attempted to develop my own identity; my
mother is Mexican and my father is white (of Hungarian descent), leaving me to feel the pull from both Mexico and the US and as well as each family. As a Spanish speaker in the US, I was often discouraged from speaking Spanish by teachers and other peers. I clearly remember my 7th grade teacher, for instance, telling me to stop speaking Spanish because as he said, “you live in America now.” Fortunately, my parents, who are firm believers of bilingual education, made sure my sister and I became fully fluent in both English and Spanish. My mother would drive thirty miles out of town everyday so that we could attend an elementary school with a decent bilingual program. My parents also sent my sister and me to school in Mexico for a few years.

Growing up, I always understood myself as being Mexican, I spoke Spanish at home, practiced traditional Mexican customs, I frequently visited Mexico, lived there a few years, and my mother always made it clear to me that I was Mexican and should be proud of it. Although I did have a paternal white family, I never considered myself white and my phenotype is clearly not that of a Caucasian. It was not until I was older that others began to question my “ethnicity” and how my Hungarian last name did not match. I went through various phases of identification. After returning from schooling in Mexico, my new middle school’s predominantly white student population left me feeling excluded and even embarrassed about my own Mexican culture and identity. In high school, I resented my “white side” and in college I recognized that I could not deny the fact that my father was white. I was a product of my father and mother’s experiences and knowledge and I had to respect both. However, I also recognized that my exterior marked me as a woman of color and that Spanish was intricately linked to my Mexican identity.
The negotiation of identity is an ongoing process, which is why I cannot write a concluding paragraph on how I decided to finally define or label myself. Instead, this process and my experiences as a woman of color have motivated me to understand the way others struggle to articulate their own identity and address the external influences like social inequality and racial discrimination that may affect one’s identification. What happens when parents are discouraged from teaching their children their own language? What happens when institutions ignore or dismiss the knowledge and values of a particular community? How does a child grow up and with what does she identify?

This research is also influenced and inspired by the continual struggle of indigenous peoples everywhere but especially within Mexico against oppression. The Zapatistas, in particular, have been a source of inspiration, as they continue to demand a dignified life for all indigenous people. Their work calls for others to participate within their own communities toward a different approach in politics that challenges racist and sexist structures of oppression and embraces a pluralistic society. The historical discrimination against indigenous people in Mexico remains a serious problem and as indigenous people migrate to the US, this racism pervades their new life across the border and manages to shape the identities of many children. Thus it is this pernicious discrimination that marks indigenous people of Mexico as separate from their mestizo counterparts and that speaks to why I feel it is imperative to address this issue.
CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

My research addresses and analyses the experiences of Mixteco youth that have grown up in San Diego, California. Some were born in Oaxaca and migrated at a very early age while others were born in the United States. Going into my research I intended to specifically address the lack of cultural and linguistic understanding on the part of the US school system. I planned to show how language acquisition programs influenced by the prominent monolingual ideology in the US have led to the loss of children’s native languages and have directly affected the development of their identity. While this still remains relevant to my discussion, as my research unfolded, I quickly realized that the local school’s language acquisition program was not the main concern of most parents and children. Instead, the recurring theme in my interviews was the discrimination many students faced inside the classroom with their mestizo or “Mexican” peers. It was then that I understood that I had underestimated the relevance of the deeply rooted racism that has existed in Mexico since the Spanish Conquest. I remember feeling frustrated at myself for omitting such a crucial aspect simply because I was so focused on answering what I wanted to address. Nevertheless, this self-reflection reminded me that active participation in the community requires listening to people’s stories, struggles, and demands. My responsibility was not to provide a voice for the “voiceless” because this would only negate a peoples’ agency but rather to serve as a vehicle for the community’s expression of their struggles, successes, and failures — not mine. Before I could even attempt to address language acquisition policies in the US
educational system, it was imperative for me to share the experiences and powerful memories
of Mixteco youth and how these experiences have shaped their own views on Mixteco
culture and language.

My research was conducted through an anthropological perspective and consisted of
semi-structured, open-ended interviews and participant observation. My research focuses on
the Mixteco community in San Diego, California in the neighborhood of Linda Vista. The
field research for this study was conducted from January 2009 to August 2009.

FAMILIA INDIGENA UNIDA AND THE MIXTECO
CULTURAL EXCHANGE

My involvement with the community began three years ago when I started learning
the Mixteco language at San Diego State University. During my first year of graduate school
I took the elementary Mixteco course, and after extensive work with my instructor, Angelina
Trujillo, she suggested that I visit the Mixteco Cultural Exchange Program in Linda Vista.
She believed that there I would have the opportunity to move away from class instruction to
the actual application of the language in conversational settings. The Mixteco Cultural
Exchange is part of Familia Indígena Unida, a local organization created by two young
Mixteca adults, Valentina Torres and Julieta Gonzalez, both graduates of San Diego State
University, who saw their future as deeply embedded in the struggles of their community.
The program developed out of a need to address the growing concerns among members of
the Mixteco community to respond to some of its most pressing needs, particularly the
community’s desire to learn Spanish and English. Most of the community members are
primarily Mixteco speakers with little formal education. Although several speak Spanish,
many remain pre-literate. In order to facilitate this need, younger Mixtecos, along with a
number of non-Mixteco activists and students who had taken an interest in learning the
Mixteco language, began organizing a program that would help address this problem while also assisting the Mixteco community with other types of social services.

The Mixteco Cultural Exchange Program is structured around language instruction in Spanish, English and Mixteco. Volunteers provide English and Spanish language instruction to mainly adult members of the community. There are currently two levels of Spanish instruction and three levels of English instruction. The latter fifteen to thirty minutes of instruction time at all levels is dedicated to teaching Mixteco. At this point, there is a shift and Mixtecos in the Spanish and English classes teach the non-Mixteco speakers their variant of the Mixteco language. The children receive help with their homework and are also actively engaged in various games and activities that encourage them to lead the instruction of Mixteco to the adult volunteers and other children who do not speak the language. A unique feature of the program is highlighting the importance of the Mixteco culture, which is in direct contrast to the suppression of their culture and language in school and in the larger society. This is particularly important in that it is a time where the Mixteco participants in the program once again share and teach about their own culture as freely as they would have in their home communities. Monthly cultural workshops take place to demonstrate important features such as food, music, art, and dance. There is also a space for the children of the adult participants to receive help with their homework and to participate in cultural activities.

In May of 2007, I set out to meet with the program director and in September of the same year, I became a volunteer. Since September 2007 I have been a beginning level Spanish instructor for adults learning how to read and write. As a volunteer instructor, I attended the community center twice a week, every Tuesday and Thursday. It was at the community center where I developed a friendship with my students and other members of the
program. By way of the program, I also met other members of the Mixteco community in Linda Vista and had the opportunity to attend *bautizos* and *bailes* in the area.

**SEEKING PERMISSION**

In March of 2008, I first approached Valentina Torres, the Mixteco Cultural Exchange program director, and proposed my research idea. Valentina found my research interesting and since the beginning stages of my research project has been very supportive. In January of 2009 when my Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol was approved, I presented Valentina and the Mixteco Kids program director, Julieta Gonzalez, with a thesis proposal and asked for their input. Both Valentina and Julieta expressed their approval and suggested various parents and children that I could possibly interview.

I began approaching members of the Mixteco Cultural Exchange Program after class and told them a little about my research. After I introduced my research, it took me a while to then actually ask parents and their children for interviews. I felt that asking for an interview was very intrusive and I was afraid of imposing myself on anyone. I also was very conscious of the fact that I am *mestiza* and I did not want to be perceived as the stereotypical non-indigenous anthropologist that takes information from a community solely for my own benefit. Many of the members in the program had become my friends and I was afraid that by asking for an interview they would misinterpret my friendship as a way to extract information from them.

I finally realized that I was doing a disservice to everyone by not getting anything done, so I finally scheduled interviews with a few parents in the community. However, after my initial interviews, I began to feel much more comfortable asking for interviews and the
whole process reminded me that the rapport I had established at the community center over
the past two years played a significant role in the parents’ interest to participate.

My experience with the local elementary school was a bit different. For some naïve
reason I thought that by going to the school and explaining my research, teachers would be
so excited and willing to participate. However, that quickly changed as soon as I made my
first phone call to a local school. I introduced myself to the secretary and gave her a very
brief summary about my work and asked if I could perhaps schedule a meeting with the
principal as I hoped the principal could refer me to a few teachers. The woman immediately
told me that I did not need to do that and followed by saying she didn’t even think there were
any students from Oaxaca or Mixtecos at the school, or as she put it, “I don’t even think we
have any of those”. She then told me to hold on and maybe she could find a teacher for me
that had “those” students. I waited for several minutes; I actually thought she was going to
hang up on me as her lack of initial care seemed to indicate disinterest. She returned to the
phone and told me that I could talk to a teacher that may “have students of that, what do you
call it, nationality?” She transferred me to the teacher’s room and I introduced myself and
told the teacher the same thing I told the secretary over the phone. She asked me to come the
following day at 12:30 so that way I could talk with her students. She was about to hang up
and I managed to tell her my name again just before she did. She seemed very rushed and I
assumed that it was because she was in the middle of class. I was really discouraged by my
phone call to the school but I was happy I had managed to schedule an interview.

Just like my phone call, the interview went a little different than I had imagined.
After I signed in at the principal’s office, I went to visit the teacher and her third grade class.
The teacher introduced me to her class and had us all sit in a circle on the floor. I explained
that I was a student writing a really long paper and started off asking what languages the students spoke and where everyone was from. All the students were bilingual Spanish and English speakers from different parts of Mexico. Four students were from Oaxaca and one spoke Mixteco. I asked the class several questions about Oaxaca but I felt the large group setting was not the most conducive. I tried to ask the teacher some questions as well but she continued to pawn off the questions on to the students.

After asking all of my questions, the teacher told me I could also speak to the students from Oaxaca separately. So, I sat in the back with the four students from Oaxaca while the teacher continued her lesson with the rest of the class. In this smaller setting, the children quickly opened up and shared information they had omitted in the group circle. All the students came from Mixteco speaking parents and eagerly told me about Oaxaca, their towns, and life at school.

The interview did not play out how I had planned and the teacher answered very few of my questions. Nevertheless, the time I spent with the four Mixteco students ended up being very helpful and informative. After the school visit, I decided that in my research the stories shared by the Mixteco students needed to take precedence over what teachers had to say. I wanted to provide a thorough discussion on the experiences of the Mixteco community before I tried introducing other perspectives. Although, the original purpose of my school visit was not fulfilled I did walk away with a more focused research plan.

**RESEARCH SAMPLE & BIAS**

I interviewed a total of 20 people. This included nine children of Mixteco migrants enrolled in public school K-12 in San Diego (ages ranging from 7 to 14), six Mixteco migrant parents, and four Mixteco young adults who attended K-12 school in the US for at
least two years (ages 23-29). Mixteco participants were identified by fulfilling one or more of the following criteria: participant speaks the Mixteco language, identifies him or herself as Mixteco, has at least one parent who speaks Mixteco, or has at least one parent who identifies him/herself as Mixteco. The Mixteco participants were all from the Mixteca Baja region of Oaxaca, which includes the towns of Santa María Natividad, Ixpantepec Nieves, San Juan Piñas, and San Jerónimo del Progreso.

I also interviewed one teacher at the local elementary school, had several informal conversations with members of the community in Linda Vista, as well as an informal conversation with a third grade classroom at the local elementary school. The interviews were semi-structured and each group had a separate set of questions.

The interviews with the Mixteco parents were conducted in Spanish. For the parents whose first language was Mixteco, they felt comfortable enough to conduct the interviews in Spanish. My interviews with the children were conducted in Spanish, English, or both. The interviews with the young adults, in particular, consisted of a lot of code switching between Spanish and English. Since I also tend to code-switch, I felt we were able to create a comfortable environment for expression during the interviews. What I did feel was intrusive in some of my interviews, especially with the Mixteca mothers, was the audio recorder. Although, they did allow me to use the recorder in the interview I noticed that some of the women became more guarded about their responses. In the instances where I decided to turn the recorder off, the women I spoke with opened up significantly.

**THEORETICAL PARADIGM**

This thesis focuses on the issue of identity, and how historical factors and personal experiences at school and in the larger community affect the process of identification of
Mixteco youth growing up in San Diego. Stuart Hall argues that identities are constructed on the “back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group or with an ideal” (1996:2). Additionally, identities are constructed through difference and are constantly in the process of change and transformation (Hall 1996).

These changing identities are the outcome of history and personal experiences (Lima 1998). Just as Kearney and Varese point out, identities are best understood through historical examination (1995:207). Therefore, the first section of this thesis examines the historical antecedents to the Mixteco population (and other indigenous groups) current conditions both in Mexico and the United States. Indigenous ethnic identity in particular, has been a highly situational phenomenon that, as Stefano Varese argues, is socially constructed and reconstructed in a permanent process of dialectical negotiation (Stephen 1996:17). Historical conflicts are then reflected in the articulation and expression of indigenous ethnic identity (Stephen 2007).

The second part of this study examines the personal experiences of parents and children regarding their process of identification. There is an important correlation between lived experiences and social location in relation to identity formation (Moya 2000:4). Previous research about Mixteco communities in the United States demonstrates how Mixteco migrants have succeeded in renegotiating and recreating transnational indigenous identities in the United States, which consequently challenge the political and hegemonic definitions previously constructed by the modern Mexican State (Kearney 2000:175).

Identification is conditional and a process of articulation (Hall 1996) and the transnational identity formulated by Mixtecos in the US remains in a process of negotiation with other ethnic groups. Drawing from the collective transnational Mixteco identity
discussed in previous research, this attempts to take a closer look at how youth, in particular, are constructing their own identities. This research focuses on the concept of “identity” as self-understanding. Self-understanding entails a process of identification and more importantly, designates multiple subjectivities (Cooper 2005). Moreover, these subjectivities both condition and are conditioned by the way people interpret their own experiences (Moya 2000:83).

Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry argue that experience has much to do with collective realities as it does with individual translations of those realities (2007:53). Thus, rather than looking at identity as a collective phenomenon, I chose to closely examine the individual interpretations of Mixteco youth growing up in San Diego. Because these interpretations directly affect self-identification (Kleinman 2007), I argue that the experiences of Mixteco youth are considerably different from that of their parents or other Mixteco migrant adults in the US discussed in previous studies.

In their research, Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (1995) point out that immigrants use their home country as a point of reference to measure their current lives in the United States (1995:188). Alternatively, second generation youth are unable to measure their current state against life in Mexico; instead their point of reference is derived from their experiences in the U.S. including the ideals and expectations of the majority society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995:188). Unlike the parents who were socialized in different contexts like Mexican schools and the workplace, their children are exposed to a different environment. The US school, in particular, has served as a principal socializing agent for children (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995).
This thesis seeks to examine the emotional and subjective aspect of self-identification. I found it imperative to include the personal narratives of the interviewees in order to fully convey the powerful and deep emotions and memories embedded within the participants’ negotiated identities and subjectivities. According to Joao Biehl et al, by attending to subjectivity in ethnographic terms, “the examination of the complex ways in which people’s inner states reflect lived experience within everyday worlds as well as within temporary spaces and transitions—moments of crisis and states of exception—can disturb and enlarge presumed understandings of what is socially possible and desirable” (2007:10).

The values and emotions acquired through experience are “embodied and projected into domestic spaces, public life, and interpersonal struggles” (Biehl et al. 2007:15). Moreover, Patricia Moya argues that “identities are subject to multiple determinations and to a continual process of verification that takes place over the course of an individual’s lifetime through her interaction with the society she lives in” (Moya 2000:83). In many cases, the experiences of the participants allowed them to develop various subjectivities to help them deal with their ethnic indigenous identities. The four young adults in this research remain in a continual process of identification, where they too are dealing with new subjectivities as indigenous women living in the United States.
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people have been historically marginalized in Mexico. Mexican discourse has often portrayed its indigenous population as folkloric remnants of an ancient civilization, which has led to a multitude of stereotypes and prejudices about Mexico’s contemporary ethnic groups (Bartolomé 2005). Before I can address current issues surrounding Mixtecos in San Diego, California, it is crucial to recognize that many of these perceptions and stereotypes are deeply rooted in Mexico’s colonial past and Mexico’s ideological formation as a nation state. This chapter will briefly discuss Mexico’s historical and political relationship with its indigenous population and the pervasiveness of ethnic discrimination within Mexican society. This history plays an important role in the creation and use of ethnic identities for those that migrate to the United States. This chapter will also review previous research on Mixteco communities and transnational organizations in Mexico and the United States.

MEXICO AND ITS INDIGENOUS POPULATION

The Spanish Conquest left profound effects in every area of indigenous life (Bonfil Batalla 1989). Similar to other counties in Latin America, the colonial experience left the native population subject to extreme marginalization and exploitation. The importance of “blood lines” during the Spanish regime was mirrored by the colony’s categorization of identities and organization of political life (Lomnitz-Adler 2001:42). Consequently, the
colonial period was a highly segregated society based on hierarchical divisions of birthright. The maintenance of ethnic boundaries allowed for the exploitation of not only indigenous people but also the African population and American-born castes like mestizos and mulattos. The physical characteristics of each group also became clear markers for ethnic manipulation.

During the Conquest and colonial period, the Spanish also considered indigenous labor essential to the extraction of wealth in New Spain. Kearney and Varese point out that “unlike the English in North America, who generally viewed the natives as obstacles to their enterprises, the Spanish regarded indigenous labor as essential to extract wealth from the gold and silver mines and from plantation that produced commodities such as sugar, silk, indigo, and cochineal for the world market” (1995:209). Since indigenous people were essential economic resources, the two authors argue that they were often legally recognized and given resources so they could perpetually be exploited by the Spanish crown, Spanish colonists, as well as the Catholic Church (Kearney 1996:209). Kearney and Varese also note, “the subsequent social identities and destinies of the indígenas and their communities in Spanish America thus developed under markedly different conditions from the English colonies” (1995:210).

The imposition of the Catholic Church served as an ideological justification for the treatment of New Spain’s colonized population. The “Indian” was then perceived and constructed as a primitive, submissive, and docile in need of religious salvation. The Catholic Church along with the Spanish authority subsequently suppressed indigenous traditions, religious beliefs, and languages (Weinberg 1970; Bonfil Batalla 1989).
The concept of racial categorization during the colonial period also generated significant tension between the Spanish-born *peninsulares* and the American-born Spanish *criollos* (creoles). This hierarchical tension along with the desire to secure power and wealth in New Spain led the *criollos* to seek independence from Spanish rule. Influenced by the French Revolution, the *criollos* adopted a Western model for nation building that embraced values of modernity, progress, and wealth (Bartolomé 2003:34). The *criollos* also sought to transform their patriotism into a new nationalism that would include all social groups born in Mexico (Lomnitz-Adler 2001:46). This national identity had to reflect a population with a common culture and language, and more importantly, a common history (Bonfil Batalla 1989:63). Thus, Mexican State was ideologically conceived as a culturally homogeneous nation via the congenial and harmonious blend of indigenous and European people, known as *mestizaje* (Gutiérrez 1999:76). The mestizo represented an identity based upon the psychological embrace of an indigenous past and the assimilation of Western ideals linked to “progress” and “modernization”.

Natividad Gutiérrez describes mestizaje as the “myth of descent” as it was inculcated by the State to shape the perceptions of Mexican society (1999:76). What is more, the racist perceptions from the colonial period remained deeply embedded in the formation of Mexico’s national identity. Indigenous groups were still considered inferior to the mestizo ideal and their presence was a contradiction to the newly conceived “modern” nation. Thus, indigenous people were expected to assimilate to the European level of Mexico’s dominant majority.

During his dictatorship, Porfirio Diaz sought to further modernize Mexico through industrialization and foreign investment. The agrarian reforms during the Porfiriato allowed
for the concentration of land leaving the rural poor, particularly indigenous people, without land. By 1900, 92% of rural Mexicans were landless (Handelman 1997). Indigenous people were still considered an impediment toward modernity and the government sought to dominate them through education, slavery, and even massacre (Lomnitz-Alder 2001).

The deep economic and social inequality created during the Porfiriato gave rise to the Mexican Revolution. One of the most considerable gains of the Revolution was Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution. The article granted special constitutional agrarian rights for rural communities to hold communal lands known as *ejidos*. As a result, several lands were repossessed by the government and redistributed to the rural population. Despite the symbolic triumphs of the Revolution, the Mexican government continued to view the integration of its indigenous population into mainstream society as the only means for achieving modernity.

The push for national identity intensified during the early 20th century. Although official discourse asserted the unification and synthesis of cultures and acknowledged the nation’s indigenous civilizations, it failed to validate its living indigenous population. Instead, mestizaje became a tool of exclusion for those that did not conform to Mexico’s path toward modernization through rejection of their indigenous identities (Martinez Novo 2006). Under national discourse, the mestizo remained the dominant majority and the “model citizen” (Velasco Ortiz 2002). *Indigenismo* emerged as the prevalent ideology in official government discourse. *Indigenismo* correlated progress with the acculturation to European ways and considered ethnic difference a hindrance for Mexico’s nationalist mestizo identity (Kearney 1990, 1991; Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Martínez Novo 2006; Nash 2001;
Bonfil Batalla 1989). Just as indigenous identity was prohibited during the colonial era, it continued to be marginalized throughout the 19th and 20th century.

Mexico’s push for a national identity is an issue that Arjun Appadurai associates with the creation of a modern state (2006). Instead of being an overwhelmingly biological reality or a complementary exchange of cultural traditions, mestizaje became an ideological product of the Mexican State (Gutierrez 1999:298). The creation of a national identity in many cases leads to the formation of what Appadurai calls “predatory identities” (2006). These identities require the extinction of another minority group in order for their own survival. Appadurai also notes that predatory identities “are products of situations in which the idea of a national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole” (Appadurai 2006:53).

The Mexican State carried out various policies that attempted to assimilate its indigenous population into the mainstream mestizo society. The educational system, in particular, became the State’s most effective means of achieving ethnic integration and linguistic uniformity (Gutierrez 1999:56). During the 1920s and 30s, the Mexican government set out to implement educational and cultural programs that promoted the nation’s political platforms, including indigenismo (García 2007:22). The Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), founded by José Vasconcelos in 1921, therefore, made efforts to bring education to parts of the population that traditionally had limited access to education, such as rural indigenous communities (2007:22). The educational curriculum in these communities sought to eradicate indigenous languages and cultures in order to integrate the population into mainstream Mexican society (Ramírez 2006; Ve’e 2007). Teachers were
sent to rural communities to educate children about national culture and language (Bonfil Batalla 1989; Nagengast et al. 1992). Indigenous languages were not taught in schools and many children were punished for speaking any language other than Spanish in the classroom (Ramírez 2006).

By the 1940s a new type of indigenismo emerged with the purpose of further incorporating indigenous people into the State (Gutiérrez 1999:96). Influenced by the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, this new indigenismo sought to glorify Mexico’s indigenous past, while promoting their integration into mainstream society (1999:96). However, as Natividad Gutiérrez points out, this new “respect for indigenous personalities” did not actually move away from the assimilationist mestizo identity. Instead, indigenismo acquired a new dimension where “the usurpation and manipulation of Indian cultures became another stage in the process of mestizaje” (Gutiérrez 1999:97). Bilingual programs, for instance, were set up in rural communities not with the purpose of preserving indigenous languages but for facilitating Spanish acquisition.

Many indigenous groups challenged Mexico’s continued practices of indigenismo and by the 1980s a dialogue emerged within the Mexican government to recognize the country’s diverse population (Maybury-Lewis 2002). As a result, the new Mexican constitution of 1993 stipulated that Mexico was a pluriethnic nation (2002:14). Despite this shift from classic indigenismo, Mexico’s new pluriethnic claims did little to mitigate the State’s attempts to assimilate indigenous groups to the mainstream population, especially with the implementation of neoliberal policies.

Following the 1982 debt crisis, Mexico signed on to a neoliberal agenda that sought to restructure the economy through deregulation, opening markets to foreign investment, and
focusing on export-oriented growth (Warnock 1995). Similar to earlier policies that tried to “integrate” the indigenous population, structural adjustment programs attempted to urbanize Mexico’s indigenous communities. Subsistence farmers and small-scale farmers could no longer rely solely on local market exchanges and were forced to move toward a cash economy. The lack of cooperatives or other regional marketing systems that were indigenous owned prevented them from competing with commercial agricultural industries (Warnock 1995). In addition, the Salinas administration amended Article 27 of the constitution, which ended any further redistribution of land to indigenous groups and removed the protected status of ejido lands. The neoliberal mindset of the current administration viewed ejidos as a relic of the past and wanted to bring ejido land into the capitalist market (Warnock 1995). The privatization of ejido lands contradicted Mexico’s pluriethnic claims to preserve and reinforce ethnic identity and served as a clear example of how classic indigenismo had reworked itself into the neoliberal framework by integrating Mexico’s indigenous base into the capitalist market (Martínez Novo 2006).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also had a dramatic effect on Mexico’s indigenous population. NAFTA proposed to lower trade barriers and promote investment in Mexico, United States, and Canada in order to stimulate economic and job growth. On an aggregate level, NAFTA appeared to increase trade and investment as well as stabilize the peso in Mexico. Yet, for small-scale farmers this meant the further commercialization of agriculture and export-oriented production. The development of new crops and the decline in the price of traditional crops left many indigenous farmers landless (Warnock 1995). A significant majority of indigenous communities was no longer making
enough money to support their farms and the degradation and over-exploitation of land forced people to seek economic opportunities elsewhere.

The maintenance of racial differences during the Spanish colonial period had a direct result of the cultural divisions still palpable in today’s Mexican discourse of modernity and growth. As previously noted, this discourse specifically excludes elements of Mexico’s past that cannot be easily merged with progress; this allows for the continued stratification and marginalization of Mexico’s indigenous population who retain their language and culture. What is more, Western notions of modernity and nationalism have helped to further construct the “Indian” stereotype within in Mexican society. Anthropologist Lynn Stephen points out that still, “the monolingual ‘traditional’ Indian is projected as an explanation for poverty, illiteracy, and dependence of so many of Mexico’s indigenous people” (2006:20). The Mexican government’s push for a homogenous mestizo culture has excluded a significant portion of the population. To this day, indigenous groups are continuously pressured to leave their cultures and languages behind in order to become part of mainstream mestizo society.

In her research, Gutierrez (1999) examined a collection of primary school textbooks published from 1970 through the 1990s and found that none of the text editions contained any specific information about the present situation of Mexico’s indigenous populations. Instead, indigenous cultures were contextualized as a form of cultural stagnation and were perceived as having little to offer to Mexican society as a whole (1999:83). The official version of “Mexican culture” in these textbooks sought to balance the indigenous past, which was primarily Aztec, with European influences. Gutierrez points out that the exclusion of other indigenous groups also creates a selective understanding of the indigenous past since the Aztecs are the only ones that receive attention in these texts (1999:83).
The emergence of indigenous movements and perspectives in the past 20 years, such as the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), have challenged Mexico’s nationalist identity and neoliberal policies while demanding the recognition and respect of Mexico’s living indigenous population. The Zapatistas, for instance, embrace the possibility of a pluralistic society that challenges various structures of oppression, including racism and sexism. Their different approach in politics also attempts to unite different sectors of society in the movement for real democracy. However, while movements like the EZLN continue to grow there remains a vast disconnect between Mexico’s indigenous and non-indigenous population. The pervasiveness of ethnic discrimination is apparent in everyday speech when terms like *indio* and *oaxaquita*¹ are used synonymously with “poor” and “ignorant” (Bartolomé 2003:37). What is more, the subordinate role of indigenous people is so deeply embedded within Mexican history, that people often use terms like “indio” without considering the historical implications. The elevated status of Spanish as the mestizo national language has also marked indigenous languages as inferior, as many refer to them as “dialects”. In many cases, referring to indigenous languages as dialects is not intended to be discriminatory, but rather grows out of the ignorance associated with the lack of knowledge on languages in the Americas and indigenous people in general.

Thus in Mexican society being “Indian” in many ways reflects a negative connotation. That is why, Bartolomé (2005) argues that in actuality few people accept defining themselves as Indians because of its pejorative context. In the 2000 census, for example, under the self-identification category there were 1 million indigenous people less

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¹ *Oaxaquita* is a pejorative term in diminutive form that is used to describe a person from Oaxaca, or any person that looks “indigenous” for that matter.
than the category of actual speakers of indigenous languages (2005:38). Although self-identification is not solely based on the use of an indigenous language, the significant gap between the two categories mirrors the mestizo mainstream society’s attitude toward its indigenous population. Indigenous languages are not viewed as sources of pride within the mestizo ideological concept; therefore, many people do not self-identify as “indigenous” even if their native language is not Spanish.

For these reasons, we must consider how the internalization of Mexico’s dominant discourse has played out on the identity of Mexico’s indigenous groups. We must recognize that a term like indio is not simply harmless Mexican vernacular, they are loaded words that carry with them over 500 years of oppression.

**MIXTECOS AND MIGRATION**

The word Mixteco is actually a Nahuatl word. After the conquest of the Aztec empire, Spanish authorities and missionaries used the language of the colonized group to describe other native communities; this is why most indigenous groups in Mexico are commonly referred to by their Nahuatl name. The proper term for Mixtecos is Ñuu Savi, which means “people of the rain.” However, because most research uses the Nahuatl term to define the Ñuu Savi, for all intents and purposes I will also use term Mixteco.

Mixtecos are the third largest indigenous group in Mexico and according to the Mexican census bureau, there are approximately 500,000 Mixtecos in the country (Velasco 2000:29). The Mixteco population is originally from southern Mexico, from the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. Two-thirds of the entire Mixteco population resides in Oaxaca, the state with the largest indigenous population and greatest ethnic diversity in Mexico. Oaxaca is also home to Zapotecos, Mazatecos, Chinantecos, Mixes, and Triquis.
among many other groups. The Mixteca region of Oaxaca is one of the poorest and most marginalized in Mexico and embedded within the region are many other indigenous groups including the Triqui, Amuzgo, and Cholteco people (Ve’e 2007).

Mixtecos have traditionally been a self-sustaining agricultural society that cultivated and sold maize, squash, and beans as their primary source of trade and cash income. Mixtecos have also supplemented their income by making and selling artisan crafts made from palm (Nagengast et al. 1992). However, as early as the 18th century, the Mixteca region was subject to the privatization of communal lands and many Mixtecos were forced to seek employment alternatives outside of the Mixteca (Velasco 2002). Mexico’s long-standing attempts to homogenize the indigenous population were also reflected in the State’s modernization policies. Just as indigenous communities were considered “backward”, subsistence farming was regarded as unproductive work (Handelman 1999:121). Mexico implemented a number of policies to industrialize the countryside and the shift from small to large-scale farming eliminated traditional work methods for many indigenous farmers. The Mixteca has also been subject to the exploitation of its natural resources. The deforestation and erosion of land in the Mixteca region caused by lumber companies has made it difficult for Mixtecos to continue traditional farming (Nagengast et al. 1992; Dominguez 2004).

From 1940 to 1960, Mixtecos migrated to Veracruz to work in the cultivation of pineapple and sugar cane. Others migrated to Mexico City, as the demand for domestic and construction workers was increasingly high due to the capital’s growing middle class. During this time period, many Mixteco men also migrated to the United States through the U.S. sponsored Bracero Program. The networks established by the braceros, especially in California, permitted many to return during the decades to follow (Runsten and Kearney
From about 1960 to 1980, the industrialized tomato fields in the northern states of Sonora and Sinaloa created a high demand for wage labor. The demand for cheap labor in the north, consequently, led a significant number of Mixtecos to work in the tomato industry (Velasco 2000).

The agricultural reforms of the nineties also led to the massive displacement of rural and indigenous communities. The attempts to “urbanize” Mexico’s indigenous sector through the privatization of ejidos and the implementation of NAFTA forced many Mixteco farmers to search for employment opportunities in Baja California and the United States. The agricultural industrialization of Baja California drove many Mixteco families to settle in the Valley of San Quintín to work in agro-export production. Mixtecos also established themselves in Tijuana to work in the informal sector as construction workers, gardeners, and street vendors (Kearney 1991; Clark Alfaro 2008). Several communities settled in San Diego and the Central Valley of California (Kearney 1991; Runsten and Kearney 1994). A demographic survey conducted by Michael Kearney and David Runsten in 1994 calculated 500,000 Mixtecos living in California from 203 towns in Oaxaca. No other extensive demographics have been conducted but according to a recent study, it is estimated that within the last five years 90,057 people from the Mixteca region have migrated to the United States (Alvarez 2008). Currently, Mixtecos can be found not only in California but also Oregon, Washington, Florida, and West Virginia (Nagengast et al. 1992; Besserer 2002; Stephen 2007).

Even after Mixtecos leave their hometowns they continue to experience ethnic discrimination. In the Valley of San Quintín, Baja California, Mixtecos and other indigenous farm laborers are exposed to harsh pesticides, substandard housing, slave wages, and
dangerous work conditions (Kearney 2000; Stephen 1996, Martinez Novo 2006). The local
government and employers have labeled indigenous workers as outsiders whose unstable
situation is presented as a choice (Martinez Novo 2006:36). Moreover, the effects of
economic deprivation created by low wages and the employers’ failure to provide basic
resources to its workers have become characterized as part of indigenous culture. Instead of
ensuring Mixteco day laborers decent wages and proper housing, government officials and
employers associate their condition of poverty as part of their “tradition” or “culture,”
invoking Oscar Lewis’ oft misused idea of a “culture of poverty” (Martinez-Novo 2006:41).
Mixtecos have also been subject to ethnic discrimination and human rights violations in
border cities. The scarcity of employment in cities like Tijuana has forced many Mixtecos to
enter the informal economy; Mixteca women and their children are often found selling
handicrafts and gum on the street. Because of their appearance and limited Spanish these
women are subject to harsh stereotypes and are constantly harassed by police (Clark-Alfaro

Mixtecos in the United States, undocumented immigrants in particular, also
experience labor exploitation and human rights abuses (Nagengast and Kearney 1990;
Stephen 1996, 2005; Zabin et al. 1993). Globalization has resulted in the industrialization of
agriculture and consequently, increased the need for cheap labor. Although historically
Mexican mestizo migrants have responded to the agricultural labor demand, it is now
Mixtecos and other indigenous migrants that are replacing mestizo farm workers (Kearney
2000). Michael Kearney (2000) indicates that the increasing rates of un- and
underemployment, especially for indigenous people, leave many Mixtecos desperate for
work and forced to accept low wages.
In addition to working in the agricultural sector, many Oaxacans, including Mixteco migrants, work within the service sector in restaurants, hotels and gas stations (Cohen 2004). Although Mixtecos are deeply incorporated into the US labor market, their participation in these low-wage jobs marginalizes them from US mainstream society and as a result, they are not incorporated socially or culturally in US English-speaking White society (Kearney 2000:181).

At the same time, Mixtecos are not fully adopted into Mexican communities because of their marginalized indigenous status within Mexican society. Kearney points out that many Mixtecos live in settings where they are marginalized from both mainstream and Chicano society (2000:173). Many Mixtecos have thus established tightly bound communities, which has allowed them to live in a transnational space “that has cultural and political dynamics different from both the national spaces of Mexico and the United States” (Kearney 2000:173).

Mixtecos are currently engaged in a process of re-negotiating and constructing their own identities within U.S. society, as seen in Kearney’s research during the past few decades. Through various political, social, and cultural practices, Mixtecos have constructed “social forms and identities that escape from cultural and political hegemony of their nation-state [Mexico]” (2000:174). The migratory experience of Mixtecos has allowed them to develop a successful subnational indigenous identity in California; something that many scholars argue would not have been possible had they remained isolated in Mexico (Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Clark-Alfaro 1991).

Victor Clark Alfaro (1991) argues that unlike other migrant groups, Mixtecos are characterized by the binational content of their sociopolitical organizations. Mixteco
organizations have established transnational networks that remain deeply linked to their hometowns. Several organizations in California have come together to address the economic, political, social, and cultural problems confronting Mixteco migrants in Oaxaca, in other parts of Mexico, and in the US (Kearney 2000). These organizations work toward improving working and living conditions of migrants and provide legal defense for migrants such as the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) and Asociación Cívica Benito Juárez (ACBJ). Transnational organizations also promote Mixteco culture through dance groups, musical bands, and other community events (Kearney 2000). The Comisión de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca (COSIO) in San Diego County, for instance, stages the annual Guelaguetza at Cal State San Marcos, where performers and vendors display various aspects of “Oaxacan folklore and colorful tradition” (as sited on their flyer and website) including music, dance, food, and handcrafts. Others organize for the direct benefit of their home communities in Oaxaca by funding community projects. The Santa María Natividad hometown association in San Diego, for example, is currently raising funds to build a sewage system in Natividad by hosting several kermeses (community dances) at Balboa Park.

Kearney (2000) argues that these organizations and their members “partially escape cultural and political hegemony of the Mexican state by residing to a great degree outside Mexican territory” (175). Being outside of Mexico and yet not socially and culturally incorporated into US society, Mixtcos manage to create and occupy a tightly bound transnational space that has cultural and political dynamics different from Mexico and United States (Kearney 2000).

Nevertheless, Mixtcos are still exposed to ethnic discrimination in the United States. As Lynn Stephen points out, Mixtcos in the U.S. continue being “a racialized category
within Mexican immigrant communities” (Stephen 2005:210). This is precisely why the origins of ethnic discrimination in Mexico are essential in understanding the experiences of Mixtecos who have settled and raised their families here in the United States. In the next chapters I will explore how Mexico’s ethnic discrimination is still lived in the U.S. and how it affects the development of identity of Mixteco youth growing up in San Diego, California.
CHAPTER 4

GROWING UP IN SAN DIEGO

INTRODUCTION TO LINDA VISTA

Mixtecos began to establish themselves in the San Diego area during the mid 1980s. Within San Diego a significant population settled in the neighborhood of Linda Vista. The area of Linda Vista was formed during the 1940s as a result of a government project to house U.S. military aircraft workers. Three thousand apartments were built to accommodate military workers and the ex-military housing still stands today in what is now Central Linda Vista. A large part of the Mixteco population in Linda Vista lives in these apartments. Most of the two- and three-bedroom apartments are painted the same color blue and remain in dilapidated conditions. Some apartments have been renovated and stand out against the rest of the blue apartment complexes. Elva, for instance, lives with her family in one of newly remodeled homes with a brand new yellow façade. Elva invited me to her home once and to my surprise it was only the outside that had been remodeled. The inside was still run down with old fixtures and appliances and in stark contrast with the outside of her apartment.

Newer apartment complexes surround the old military housing and are significantly larger resulting in higher rents. Many people cut down on the cost of rent by sharing the apartment with other families. Several of the people I interviewed spoke about sharing an apartment with fifteen or more people when they first arrived to Linda Vista. Amelia and her son currently live in a two-bedroom apartment with another family. She and her son sleep in the living room downstairs while the other family lives in the bedrooms upstairs. Suzana, her
husband and their 4 children live in a three-bedroom apartment and rent the spare room to provide extra income.

Cohen (2004) notes that most migrants from Oaxaca work in the service sector but the majority of Mixteco men in Linda Vista work in agriculture, landscaping, or nurseries in North County. Women also work in the nurseries and go to places like La Jolla and Del Mar for domestic work. In his research, Kearney explained (2000) that although Mixtecos are incorporated into the US labor market, they are not absorbed into the English-speaking white U.S. mainstream. Instead, they interact more on a daily basis with Mexican mestizos and other immigrants from Latin America and Asia (Kearney 2000:181). This is also the case for Mixtecos in Linda Vista, who live amongst mestizo, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong residents. Kearney argues, “being relatively unexposed to ‘mainstream’ culture and society, they [Mixtecos] are thus relatively free to elaborate other cultural identities” (2000:181). This too holds true in Linda Vista where several aspects of the community are reminiscent of life in Mexico.

Similar to the Mixteco communities of Tijuana described by Victor Clark-Alfaro (1991, 2008), Mixtecos in Linda Vista seek to reproduce traditional communal life. Weekends are an opportunity for people to get together. Many families celebrate religious rituals steeped in Catholicism such as baptisms, first communions, quinceañeras, and more secular but important events such as birthdays. You can see the rented inflatable bounce houses set up in the apartment complex common spaces and hear the chilenas from blocks away. The propensity to celebrate life seeped into my understanding when I went to a baptism party and forgot the address at home. I figured it wasn’t a big deal since I already knew on which street it was to take place. When I arrived I realized that there were several
parties happening on that same street; it took me a while to find the right one but I eventually succeeded. Daily life too is reinvented in Linda Vista as the evenings are marked by a grocery or *abarrotes* truck driving through the apartment parking lots selling fruit, vegetables, candy, chips, and other groceries.

There are two elementary schools and one middle school in the surrounding area. According to the California Department of Education (2007-2008) more than half the students in all three schools are considered “Hispanic.” At Linda Vista Elementary for instance, 72% of students are Hispanic and 70% are considered English Learner (EL) students. Out of the EL students, 76% speak Spanish at home and 2% of EL students are reported to speak Mixteco at home. Similarly, at Montgomery Middle School 55% of students are Hispanic. Over half of the school’s EL students speak Spanish as their first language while 3% speak Mixteco at home. It is important to note that the reported percentage of Mixteco speakers is open to debate. In actuality, very few people accept defining themselves as “indigenous” or as Mixteco speakers precisely because of the historically pejorative and oppressive discourse against indigenous groups discussed in Chapter 3. Many also see the movement into a new country as an opportunity to reinvent themselves and leave behind the discrimination that prevents them from accessing an equal future to other Mexicans. While a seemingly contradictory practice to what has been argued thus far, being Mixteco publicly may sometimes take a back seat to being Mixteco in their own neighborhoods and lives. Thus, it is likely that many more students speak Mixteco at home than indicated in the school’s reported demographics.
**GOING TO SCHOOL IN LINDA VISTA**

Based on the research previously discussed, Mixtecos in the US have created a third space (Bhabha 1994), what scholars and others call Oaxacalifornia; yet, how does this third space play out in the lives of their children who are now growing up in San Diego? A better understanding of the lived experience of Mixtecos requires a distinction between the experiences of Mixteco children from migrant adults in previous investigations, particularly because children deal with unique issues of integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization at school with their teachers and peers. In their research, Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (1995) point out that immigrants use their home country [Mexico] as a point of reference to measure their current lives in the United States (1995:188). Alternatively, second generation youth are unable to measure their current state against life in Mexico; instead their point of reference is derived from their experiences in the U.S. including the ideals and expectations of the majority society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995:188).

Unlike the parents who were socialized in different contexts (like Mexican schools and the workplace), the U.S. school serves as a principal socializing agent for children. It is here where Mixtecos and other culturally diverse students find themselves confronted with different and conflicting cultural and social values at home and in the classroom (Roer-Strier 2000). What is more, formal education serves as a key instrument for imposing the dominant language and dominant culture (Skutnabb-Kangas 1995:71). Thus, children become aware of positive and negative social images in the classroom that often mirror values and attitudes of the broader society (Rombaut 1995; Cummins 1996; Brittain 2002).

For the children born in Oaxaca, Linda Vista represents a new environment to which they must adapt. Yet for those in the U.S., Linda Vista still is not their “hometown” since they are not fully integrated into mainstream dominant U.S. society. San Diego’s urban
environment really stood out to Valentina, 29, when she first arrived in Linda Vista at age twelve in the early 1990s. Valentina lived in an ex-military apartment with several other families and longed for the open air, mountains and vegetation of her hometown, Santa María Natividad. The differences between her hometown and Linda Vista were amplified in school.

Although Valentina was about to begin the sixth grade in Oaxaca, she had to repeat fifth grade at Linda Vista Elementary because of her limited knowledge of Spanish. She was placed in an ESL classroom, which she describes below:

It was difficult. It was a very difficult year. It was a very difficult culture. I didn’t like the food. First the food, pizza, no, no, no, no, I didn’t like it. We missed Natividad, we missed the mountains, we missed the food from over there, the people, and sandwiches and ham we didn’t know what those were. The only food I did like was hash browns at school in Linda Vista. That was the only food I liked, the rest I hated. Milk, I wouldn’t drink it. So, the food was difficult and then the traffic system, the bus system, we didn’t understand because of the language, you know. So, it was really hard for us to adapt.

They put us with the rest of the students that didn’t speak English well…either. They were Vietnamese,
The fear that the children and young adults expressed during the interviews resulted from being unable to speak the language of instruction, English (and in some cases, Spanish). The inability to speak English also carried a sense of shame for Eduardo, a fifth grader. He explained:

Porque cuando me preguntaban, no sabía que era el inglés y solamente, solamente, le decía no, no. Me daba pena pero, um, como decir, solamente no saber el inglés. Me preguntan hablas inglés y yo decía no, solamente español y mixteco. [Interview July 2009]

Many Mixteco children enter the classroom speaking limited Spanish or no Spanish at all. Valentina explained, “Hablábamos el español pero todo mocho, todo muy mal, no correctamente. Todo al revés porque el mixteco si lo traduces al español pues, se lee al revés” [We spoke Mixteco but very mocho, very poorly, not correctly. It was all backwards because in Mixteco if you translate it to Spanish, it reads backwards]. Those students that speak no Spanish at all are unable to communicate with their teacher or their classmates.

Paulina, 24, only spoke Mixteco when she first arrived to Linda Vista in the early nineties.

Well, in Oaxaca I grew mostly with my mom because my dad was working here, in United States and my mom is fluent in Mixteco so that was our first native language. So all of us, my older sister, my two older sisters, me and my two other youngest that were almost babies we…that was our first language, like we didn’t

Hmong, Lao and Mexicans and us. Well, they put us, it was ESL and they put us all together without being able to communicate trying to learn English. The Mexican student couldn’t communicate with the Hmong student. The Hmong student couldn’t communicate with us either, then we learned a few words in English. So then we started learning.

It was hard. At first it was hard because, well, you had that mentality of embarrassment, of shame of not knowing the language, well, if you say it or you pronounce it wrong they make fun of you and to not know, the fear, you know. The fear of saying something incorrect and it was hard at first for me in particular because I had to learn Spanish really well and I had to learn English at the same time.

4 Name has been changed to protect anonymity.

5 Because when they would ask me, I didn’t know what English was and I only, I would say no, no. I was ashamed but, um, how do you say, only not knowing English. They would ask me, do you speak English and I would say no, only Spanish and Mixteco.
know what Spanish was. We didn’t know how to say anything in Spanish and Mixteco was it. [Interview February 2009]

Paulina remembered being “really scared” when she started kindergarten in Linda Vista. Recalling the memories of her childhood during the interview made Paulina very emotional. Paulina cried as she remembered not being able to go to the bathroom because her teacher did not understand her.

Yeah, that was a big challenge because here the teachers, some of the teachers spoke Spanish. Like even if they spoke Spanish I didn’t understand them because I only did one year in school in Oaxaca but they still taught us in Mixteco. It was a challenge to communicate to the teachers. I just wanted to go to the restroom and you couldn’t, you had to like, I don’t know like, make signs or like my cousin was in my classroom so that was helpful because she knew Spanish and like it was definitely hard just being a kid and wanting to go use the restroom or go play and nobody understands you. So yeah, I remember it was a challenge. [Interview Paulina February 2009]

Linguist Jim Cummins (1996) argues that students like Paulina and Valentina start immediately from a disadvantage when their language, culture, and experiences are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions. Everything they have learned about life and the world prior to coming to the US is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning (Cummins 1996). In many ways, the experiences of Valentina and Paulina are similar to many other culturally diverse students attending school in the United States. Historically, the U.S. education system has improperly addressed the needs of English language learners (Crawford 1992; Cummins 1996, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas 1995; Tollefson 1991, 2002; Weinberg 1977). There has been much conflict over language policies in the United States and despite a nation wide push for bilingual education in the mid 1970s; English immersion, also known as sink-or-swim, education has continuously challenged attempts for a pluralist language education (Schmidt 2000). Cummins explains, “in the past, schools have reinforced the pattern of disempowerment by punishing students for speaking their home language in school and
ignoring or dismissing the knowledge and values of a particular community”, thus, viewing culturally diverse students as inherently inferior (1996:iv).

After the passing of Proposition 227 in 1998, bilingual education programs in California were replaced with one-year English immersion (Stritikus 2002). English Language Development (ELD) policies sought to push English as quickly as possible in spite of the research that claimed such a policy would be detrimental to student learning.6 Proposition 227 presented a direct challenge to the idea that languages other than English have a legitimate and valuable place in the education of students (2002:10). The monolingual ideology behind propositions like 227 along with current language policies, impose on children and their parents the idea that learning English as quickly as possible is essential. This perception is a strategy that gives English a higher status in social and educational contexts (Skutnabb-Kangas 1995; Stritikus 2002; Tollefson 1991). Consequently, the language of the English learners, in this case of Mixteco students, is placed in a subordinate and inferior role.

This is also the case for Eduardo, who came to the United States two years ago. His first language is Mixteco and is the language spoken at home. He has a conversational command of Spanish, although he is unable to write it. He is currently in fifth grade and his teacher only speaks English. In order to understand what goes on in class, he asks his classmates to translate into Spanish. No one in his classroom recognizes that he speaks Mixteco. Recently, 11-year-old Eduardo decided to supplement his schooling by taking English classes at the program where I volunteer. Because he cannot understand what was

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going on in class, he decided to take English classes alongside adult members of the program.

Eduardo recognizes that he is losing his ability to speak Mixteco and this makes him sad. He says his parents tease him because he speaks it *al revés* (backwards). Eduardo has a 2-year-old brother who is just learning to speak. Although his brother speaks Mixteco, Eduardo pointed out to me that he would eventually stop speaking it. He feels that once his brother started school, he would *have* to leave Mixteco behind in order to learn English. Eduardo knows this from experience and realizes that he must come to terms with learning English in order to succeed even if this means leaving his own language behind. After only two years in the U.S., Eduardo’s attitude already reflects the message he is receiving at school, that English is the only language of value in the United States.

Much research conducted about culturally diverse students reveals that schooling in the US, has historically been a key instrument for imposing assimilation into both the dominant language and the dominant culture (Skutnab-Kangas and Phillipson 1995: 71). In this process of assimilation, schooling ends up subtracting a student’s culture and language by dismissing his cultural knowledge or eroding his cultural capital (Valenzuela 2002). Just like Paulina, the language Eduardo brings to the classroom is intimately connected with his loved ones and his personal identity and to dismiss or even suggest that this language is “wrong” is to suggest that something is wrong with Eduardo and his family (Delpit 1995:53). This is precisely why many children to feel ashamed about their cultural and language and actively reject the use of their native language (Cummins 1994; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995).
Similarly, formal education for Paulina played an important role in the imposition of a new language and the attrition of her native language, Mixteco. Paulina was rapidly placed in mainstream English classes by the time she was in third grade, which presented challenges for her. In her words:

It was challenging because its like one year you know no Spanish, you’re thrown into a Spanish class where everybody speaks Spanish but you can’t communicate and then the next year all of the sudden you’re thrown into a different class, English, and you kinda know Spanish but not really and you’re thrown into an English class and it’s like I felt like I was more lost. [Interview February 2009]

The rapid placement and the separation from her friends had an emotional toll on Paulina, even as she explained during the interview:

…I started learning Spanish, I think the class was Spanish but they were also teaching us English. I guess you would say, maybe at the same time. Yeah but with Spanish, I just felt like I learned the basics, just a little bit. And then in second grade I got moved, second or third, I got moved to an English class so everything was in English and I got like, separated from my friends so I started learning English so I started catching up a little bit more to English and then like just leaving the Spanish on the side in a way, like not really continuing learning Spanish, so my Spanish was bad. I think, right now, its still like…I don’t really consider myself fluent in Spanish nor English. I…I just consider I speak just the average for both of them. So yeah…so I started learning both of them at the same time you would say. [Interview February 2009]

To this day, Paulina does not consider herself fluent in either Spanish or English. Moreover, the recognition of Paulina’s first language (the language she was most knowledgeable in when she entered school), Mixteco, was completely absent during her schooling. As Paulina got older she began to speak less Mixteco at home and by the time she reached middle school, she had stopped completely.

**CONCLUSION**

The way language acquisition is perceived in the classroom is reflected in these narratives. The pressure to learn English often leads to the attrition of their home languages
as argued by Jim Cummins (1996). When no value is placed on what a student brings into the classroom, a child’s language and culture will eventually lose value for the student as well. Angela Valenzuela (2002) argues that ELD programs provide an “illusion of inclusion” but the institutionalized message conveys that Spanish is a second rate language and the goals of bilingualism are not worthwhile (163). She further points out that English learning youth are regarded as "limited English proficient" rather than as "Spanish dominant" or as potentially bilingual. Thus, their fluency in Spanish or in this case Mixteco is viewed as a "barrier" that needs to be overcome (2002:173).

The Mixteco students’ experiences at school with language learning become part of their acculturation to US society. Unlike their parents who may have escaped the political hegemony of Mexico as stated by Kearney and others, the children of Mixteco migrant parents are now subject to the Unites States’ methods of assimilation. Nevertheless, Paulina and Eduardo’s loss of Mixteco is not solely a result of the U.S. school system’s language acquisition policies or subtractive practices. There are other factors that affect the decisions children make regarding the rejection of their own language and culture, which I will discuss in the following chapter.
Verónica, Luis, and Elena are siblings and came to the U.S. in 2003. The children speak Mixteco at home since their parents do not speak Spanish. Verónica, Luis, and Elena do not speak Spanish, although it is often assumed that they do by their classmates, teachers, and even volunteers at the community center where I volunteer (Mixteco Cultural Exchange). When I asked what language they spoke at home, Luis pointed out that they spoke Mixteco with their parents but amongst each other they only speak English, “Me, [Verónica] speak English and [Elena]. We don’t speak Mixteco to each other.” He giggled when he told me he and his two sisters only spoke English with each other and when I asked if anyone knew he spoke Mixteco at school, he responded: “No, it’s a secret.”

My interview with the three siblings was at the very beginning of my research and Luis’s response, although very brief, evoked many more questions concerning the way he is currently negotiating his identity as a result of his own language loss. This is precisely when my research evolved from simply addressing the issues with language acquisition policies towards understanding other factors that would influence a child’s views on his or her own culture and language. Luis’s “secret” identity went beyond something he learned in his ELD

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Names were changed to protect anonymity.
class and finds itself deeply embedded within a historical context, one with which many indigenous groups are far too familiar.

**PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AT HOME**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Mexico’s dominant discourse has historically marginalized its indigenous population. Despite’s Mexico’s attempts to “unify” its population, Kearney points out that the government and most of society continues to promote “contradictory projects that seek cultural homogenization while favoring the reproduction of ethnic difference” (Martinez Novo 2005:60).

Like all parents, the experiences that are internalized as part of their own life, in this case indigenous discrimination in Mexico, are most often passed on to their children. Although their children are growing up in a different country with new cultural, social, and political contexts, they are still confronted with the pervasive discourse that is rooted in Mexico’s colonial past. The historical oppression and marginalization of indigenous groups in Mexico has had devastating effects on the appreciation of language and cultural identity within the Mixteco community. Parents themselves often question the necessity of teaching their children Mixteco. Suzana, a mother of four, admitted that she had decided not to teach her daughters Mixteco, “Yo no les enseñé a ellas porque yo batallé mucho para aprender el español y pensé que también les iba a pasar a ellas. Lo poquito de español que yo sabía les hablaba a ellas y ya lo demás lo fueron aprendiendo en la escuela” [I did not teach them because I struggled very much learning Spanish and I thought it would also happen to them. The little Spanish that I did know I would speak with them but the rest they were learning in school]. In Tijuana, the girls’ grandmother would speak Mixteco to them but when her first
daughter started kindergarten, Suzana feared Mixteco would hinder her daughter’s learning.

In Suzana’s words:

Pero yo miraba cuando ella iba al kinder la maestra le hablaba y ella como que se quedaba así, casi no sabia que es lo que le estaban diciendo porque mi suegra le hablaba en mixteco. Y ya cuando ella quería algo lo hablaba el español pero como que metía el mixteco cuando estaba chiquita y ya de allí le dijimos que pues, tratará mejor de hablar puro español. Así casi no les enseñé Mixteco.

[Interview July 2009] 8

Faustina is the young mother of a three-year-old girl. Faustina left her town of Coicoyán de las Flores to look for work in Tijuana only a few years ago. Faustina only spoke Mixteco and because she never went to school, she did not know how to read and write. Faustina explained that her stay in Tijuana was very difficult and emotionally painful, particularly because she did not speak Spanish. Although she is proud of the fact that she learned Spanish all by herself by watching novelas on television, she still wishes she could read and write. Faustina’s experiences have influenced the way she has raised her daughter, and the life she has lived is not what she wants for her little girl. She believes her daughter needs to learn Spanish and English, not Mixteco. She said that if her daughter ever wants to learn Mixteco, she could do that when she is older, right now Spanish and English are more important.

Faustina’s perspective is a common one within the community. Valentina believes that the discrimination people face greatly affects the way they view their own language. Although Valentina does speak Mixteco, her younger siblings do not, which she attributes to the community’s perceptions on language.

8 Because I would see that when she would go to kindergarten the teacher would speak to her and she wouldn’t know what she was saying because my mother-in-law spoke to her in Mixteco. And when she wanted something she would speak Spanish but she would include Mixteco when she was little and from then on we said we would try to speak only Spanish. So, I hardly taught them Mixteco.
Porque los insultos y por los rechazos, la discriminación entre la gente, entre uno mixteco mismo se discrimina, no? Que tú hablas mixteco, que no sirve para nada. Entonces eso desanima a los padres a que enseñen a sus hijos mixteco. Entonces, prefieren…“mi hijo habla el español”, es como un gran ¡guau! que hablen español y que no hablen el mixteco. Para ellos es mejor que ellos aprendan español.

[Interview February 2009]9

Julieta, 27, also explains that she never learned Mixteco from her parents, “I’m just guessing because he [father] went through a lot things when he would speak [Mixteco] so he thinks, oh well I’ll just speak to them in español.”

The parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of children like Julieta and Valentina were exposed to a discourse that continuously repressed the use of indigenous languages in Mexican society. Prior to the 1960s, the Mexican government sought to resolve the “backwardness” of the indigenous population by way of education in the classroom (Nagengast et al. 1992:4). Educators taught “modern” values while enforcing the Spanish language and prohibiting students from speaking their native languages (1992:4). Monolingual education, known as castellanización, formed part of the school system with the intent of suppressing indigenous languages (Figueroa 2005). Similar to research in other countries, scholars in Mexico argue that the absence of indigenous languages and cultures inside the classroom devalues the culture of the child and forces him to assimilate to the dominate culture (Garduño et al. 1989; Schmelkes 2001).

The negative effects of Mexico’s castellanización were recognized during the 1960s with the inclusion of bilingual teachers into the school system. Nonetheless, the implementation of bilingual education in Mexico remains problematic. The Ve’e Tu’un

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9 Because of the insults and rejection, the discrimination among the people, amongst Mixtecos themselves they discriminate. That you speak Mixteco that it isn’t worth anything. So that discourages the parents from teaching their children Mixteco. So, they prefer… “My son speaks Spanish”, it’s like a big wow that they speak Spanish and they don’t speak Mixteco. For them it’s better that they learn Spanish.
Savi, “Academia de la Lengua Mixteca,” points out that many bilingual teachers themselves perpetuate the rhetoric behind castellanización (2007). Although Mexico has stipulated its pluriethnic nature and attempted to reverse (some) indigenismo policies, in practice discriminatory policies against indigenous language and culture remain embedded in everyday discourse. The pejorative classification of indigenous languages as “dialects” in Mexico’s everyday speech, for instance, still contributes to the subordination of languages like Mixteco. Even within the Mixteco community, the language is commonly referred to as *tu’un nda’vi*, meaning “the poor language”. Spanish on the other hand is referred to as *tu’un jaan*, “the rich language”.

The Ve’e Tu’un Savi argues that the suppression and in some cases extermination of indigenous languages has greatly damaged the self-esteem of Mexico’s indigenous population. This is precisely why many people do not want to know or learn about their ancestors’ language and culture because they do not want to continue being subject to social inequality (2007:19).

In other instances, parents have tried to teach their children Mixteco but their children are the ones that reject the language. Senobia, a mother of seven, explained that as her children grew up they refused to speak Mixteco. She admits it is sad they do not speak Mixteco but accepted their refusal to learn it. Norma, 23, one of Senobia’s daughters, explained that it was most likely what her older siblings went through that made them stop speaking Mixteco.

I asked my mom as to why I didn’t learn it and she said it was probably because my older brothers and sisters they stopped speaking it and she was the only one

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10 Ve’e Tu’un Savi “Academia de la Lengua Mixteca” was established in 1997 in Oaxaca with the purpose of revitalizing the Mixteco language and developing its written form, while also strengthening Mixteco identity.
and my dad who would speak it at home. And I don’t know, I think I was…she says we refused to learn it but I don’t know. I’m thinking that maybe my brothers, ‘cause I have older brothers and I was the youngest, they would speak Spanish to me. I guess it was up to me or…I have no idea. [Interview July 2009]

I asked why she thought her older siblings stopped speaking Mixteco, she responded:

Well, my older sisters told me that when they moved back to Mexico City, when they were very little, right, I think they were in 4th grade or 5th grade…I don’t remember…Mexico City, they got laughed at, you know. They were teased about it so they stopped so it was like they can’t speak that so they stopped. I mean they were ashamed of it, so that’s why. [Interview July 2009]

Amelia, the mother of an eight year old boy, also remembers her son, Jorge, at a very early age did not want to speak Mixteco. Every time she would speak to Jorge in Mixteco, he would respond, “¡Cállese, no se qué habla! ¡No quiero escuchar!” [Shut up, I don’t know what you speak! I don’t want to hear!].

In these cases, why have the children made the decision to stop speaking the language of their parents? What factors influenced this decision? The rejection of language and culture is not exclusive to Mixtecos living in the United States. As I have previously discussed in Chapter 4, subtractive schooling causes children of immigrants to often suffer shame and doubt and in an attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture, they actively reject the use of their native language (Cummins 1994; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995).

This holds true for the Mixteco youth in this research. Yet, Norma’s assumption about her siblings no longer wanting to speak Mixteco alludes to something more. Aside from the existing modes of marginalization in the US and the pressures of assimilation imposed by the US school system and US discourse in general, it alludes to the idea that the teasing that Mixteco students experience from their Mexican mestizo classmates is reminiscent of the historically oppressive discourse against indigenous groups in Mexico.
This is an added discourse that is imported to the United States and relived by the children of Mixteco migrants. The following section will explore these factors, particularly within the classroom and the experiences between Mixteco students and their Mexican mestizo classmates.

** Facing Discrimination in the Classroom **

The stereotypes and prejudices about indigenous groups are not limited to Mexico. The historically oppressive discourse is imported from Mexico into the already existing framework of ethnic and linguistic discrimination in the United States, as Mixtecos establish themselves in the US. Lynn Stephen argues that indigenous migrants in the U.S. “have become and continue to be a racialized category within Mexican immigrant communities” (2007:210). Similarly, in his research with Mixtecos in Madera, California, Federico Besserer argues that the “the implications of this discourse have hunted the Sanjuanenses [Mixtecos from San Juan Mixtepec] all the way to the United States” (1998:5). Even Mixtecos who have grown up all their lives in the U.S. are often questioned by Chicanos who do not see them as Mexicans in the first place and therefore do not consider them Mexican-Americans, but rather as Indians (Besserer 1998). Like Mixtecos growing up in Madera, Mixtecos in Linda Vista face similar discrimination and rejection by their fellow Mexican mestizo classmates.

Once again, ten-year-old Luis’ “secret” identity came to mind when I began to flesh out the many reasons why he would want to keep his Mixteco identity away from his classmates. Luis explained to me that if his classmates knew they would single him out and tease him. In Luis’s words: “Yeah ‘cause some kids always say ‘He speaks Mixteco’. They...
say that, that’s why… That’s why I don’t like to say that I’m from Oaxaca.” The children Luis feared would mock him were not his Anglo classmates but his mestizo peers.

Teasing became a recurring topic during my interviews. Karina, a third grader, explained that in her class students made fun of others because of their country of origin or because of the color of their skin. When I asked if she or her sister had ever been teased she replied: “Sí, como a mi a veces y a ella también a veces se burlan casi de todos los niños que somos así cafecitas” [Yes, like to me sometimes and to her also sometimes they make fun of almost all the children like us that are brown]. Karina also pointed out that it was the Mexican students that teased her because of her darker skin complexion.

For several Mixteco students, the lack of Spanish fluency immediately marked them as the “other” inside a classroom of Spanish speakers. When Valentina first started school, her Spanish was very weak and she recalled her classmates teasing her for it.

Entonces, en la escuela nos hacían burlas porque no hablábamos bien el español. Me acuerdo que yo decía “la mapa” y decían ‘no es la mapa es el mapa’. Entonces me pusieron de apodo “la mapa.” Entonces en ese momento te avergüenzas de ser, no sé, por la culpa de ser mixteco, hablar mixteco, no aprendes bien el otro idioma. Entonces, como que te da pena y dices pues no, no somos mixtecos. [Interview February 2009]

Paulina also felt embarrassed about being from Oaxaca, especially in middle school. Whenever someone would ask her where she was from, Paulina would avoid the question, “I would kinda like before hide it and say ‘Oh, I’m just from Mexico, Mexico that’s it’. I won’t say Oaxaca.” Just like the memories of when she first started school in Linda Vista,

11 So at school they would make fun of us because we didn’t speak Spanish well. I remember I used to say “la mapa” and they would say “It’s not la mapa, it’s el mapa.” So the gave me the nickname of “la mapa”. So in that moment you fell ashamed for being. I don’t know, because you are Mixteco, because you speak Mixteco you don’t learn the other language well. So you get embarrassed and you say well, no we aren’t Mixtecos.
remembering her middle school experiences was painful. Paulina was crying when she said the following:

…In middle school I was kinda ashamed in a way of being who I was because you know, people…I don’t know. Sometimes students can be very cruel and some people would think that I was stuck up or other people would think ‘She’s just a Mexican’ and uh, I think junior high, that’s when if you were dark, especially the Mexican kids, they’re very…uh, I don’t know, they say words without thinking. They wouldn’t know they were hurting the person because I remember they would make fun of the darker kids, the Mexican kids [would], because of the skin color. They would say, “Tu eres una india” or “you’re from here” so in middle school I think I was kinda ashamed to say that I was from Oaxaca. I regret it, not saying, I regret not saying that I was from there. I wish I had said it still, that it was right. So I remember being picked on a lot. I was a darker kid. [Interview February 2009]

Like Luis and Isabel, her mestizo peers teased Paulina. When I asked if any white students teased her, she responded:

I would say like the American kids were more understandable. ‘Cause maybe they assume we’re all Mexicans, they didn’t really care what part of Mexico you were from or if your skin was darker. It was just within the Mexican culture that they do treat you bad because of your darker skin or because of your features, indigenous features. I mean it was just between Mexicans, so that’s what…I don’t know, that was the hardest part to understand, like hey, we’re from the same country. [Interview February 2009]

These narratives reflect the same historically discriminatory perspective against indigenous groups in Mexico. Terms like indio are still prevalent in the everyday speech of Mexican populations in the United States and for students like Paulina these terms continue to be offensive. So much so that students end up abandoning their language and culture, at least in the public realm. What is more, the teasing Paulina endured in middle school influenced her decision to stop speaking Mixteco. Paulina’s abandonment of Mixteco to acquire English is what Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco consider a symbolic act of ethnic renunciation, “it is giving up the mother tongue for the instrumental tongue of the dominant group” (1995:73).
Similarly, when Norma was in middle school and high school she never admitted to her classmates she was from Oaxaca, “I would just say Mexican, I’m Mexican.” Norma felt most embarrassed when her parents would go to her school and her friends would tease her for speaking Mixteco.

I remember that we were laughed at, you know, ‘cause whenever my mom would go she doesn’t look like the…she would come like not well dressed and she wouldn’t be able to speak Spanish and I remember, yeah, we would get teased because we spoke Mixteco but other than that it was okay. [Interview July 2009]

Norma also spoke about feeling embarrassed when here parents would come to school for parent-teacher conferences. Norma felt mortified when her friends would hear her parents speaking Mixteco, as she explained, “I was like Oh my God! and they [Norma’s friends] would hear and be like ’What? What are they speaking’, you know and it was like oh my God!”

Shame and doubt can compromise and undermine the self-confidence and development of a child (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995) and those feelings are especially resonant in the students’ voices in this research. For Julieta, the thought of considering herself indigenous or Mixteca in elementary and middle school was unimaginable.

Being honest…no. No, siempre decía que era nomás de Mexico. I wouldn’t say I was from Oaxaca. Maybe because I don’t know, people would say okay si es de Oaxaca es una india y no se que tanto. So maybe that’s why I would just say no. [Interview February 2009]

Like Julieta, many students in this research identified as Mexican, at least publicly, in order to avoid teasing from their peers. Paulina and Norma, for example, would avoid elaborating on where in Mexico they were from so that other Mexican peers would not tease them for being from Oaxaca. Still, there were other aspects that marked many of the students in this research as targets for teasing, such as their dark complexion, their Spanish fluency, or
their parents, as was the case for Norma. In these situations, identifying as Mexican for many of these students did not diminish the teasing they experienced from their peers for being “Indians.” Thus, the teasing and rejection by their mestizo classmates stimulated feelings of shame on behalf of many of the participants interviewed in this research. As discussed in the previous chapter, Paulina also struggled with her identity through out middle school and high school. She was embarrassed to say she was from Oaxaca, yet she knew there was something that made her different from her mestiza friends.

It was hard, like I couldn’t proudly say that I was Mexican because my fellow Mexican classmates were like looking down on me so it’s like I’m not proud, I’m not Mexican. In a way I wanted to say, I’m not Mexican.

Valentina also struggled trying to find a balance between being Mexican and Mixteca, feeling as if the two were mutually exclusive. In high school, she remembered telling herself, “tengo que decir que sí soy mexicana pero a la vez soy más indígena, que tengo mi propia cultura” [I have to say that I am Mexican but at the same time I am more indigenous, that I have my own culture]. Rather than rejecting a Mexican identity, Valentina sought to take on these two identities. However, it was not until she was much older that she had the opportunity to create a space to do so, which I will discuss in the last chapter.

**CONCLUSION**

The articulation of identity for these students has been a long and open-ended process. The feelings of shame described by the students play a prominent role in the way they have negotiated and shaped their identity. This shame is brought on not only by subtractive schooling practices in the US but also by a historically oppressive discourse that is imported from Mexico. If that is the case, are the Mixteco youth in Linda Vista
developing “successful subnational indigenous identities” as suggested by previous researched in Mixteco migrant communities.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Michael Kearney argued that although Mixteco migrants are deeply incorporated into the US labor market, they live in communities that are marginalized from both mainstream Anglo and Chicano society; this is why they have successfully created a transnational space that goes “beyond the territories and the legal and cultural domains of both Mexico and the United States” (Kearney 2000: 173). Many Mixteco migrants have negotiated the “transnational topography” of Oaxaca by introducing elements that recreate their hometowns like music, dance groups, radio programs, hometown associations, and festivals (Besserer 2002:146). Thus, the formation of Mixteco transnational communities has allowed them to construct identities that escape from cultural and political hegemony of Mexico (Kearney 2000).

This could be the case for the Mixteco migrant adults in Linda Vista, however, it produces the question, Are their children exposed to a similar articulation of indigenous identity? Perhaps it is enough for parents to recreate their hometown in order to reclaim their Mixteco identity or create a new transnational indigenous identity but is this enough for a child to publicly identify as Mixteco given the experiences they face outside of their transnational communities?

As part of their acculturation to U.S. society, students experience language learning through the school system (Portes 1996) and the narratives in this research reveal that the experiences inside the classroom are powerful influences in the way they perceive their own culture and language. Unlike their parents’ identities that are significantly rooted to a
hometown in Oaxaca, the students’ notions of “home” are quite different. Much of their perceptions about their indigenous identity are associated with their experiences in the US, in the classroom and their interactions with their Mexican mestizo peers. Just as Kearney explained, Mixteco parents are exposed to US society through labor markets but they are not yet socially and culturally incorporated into US society. Their children on the other hand, experience US society through a very different context. For these children, the school becomes the principal socializing agent for imposing the United States’ dominant language and culture. The pressure to learn English and consequently assimilate to the broader US society is experienced to a much higher degree for the children of Mixteco migrant parents. This is a key difference between migrant adults and children living the US. In many cases, Mixteco adults, like the ones discussed in previous studies, have been able to establish their identity using their indigenous identity and even their Mixteco language and culture as a base for forming their identity in the US. Immigrant or second generation children growing up in the US, on the contrary, become preoccupied with acquiring fluency in the dominant language and culture rather than elaborating their own ethnic identities in the US (Valenzuela 2002:169).

In addition to US schooling practices, Mixteco children are also exposed to the historically oppressive rhetoric of Mexico’s ethnic and racial classifications. The narratives in Chapter 5 reveal that most of the children end up feeling ashamed, develop a “secret” identity, and even stop speaking their native language. According to Bhiel, the students in this research have managed to develop subjectivities that helped them manage the negative social encounters they face in and outside of the classroom. He argues that subjectivity “provides the ground for subjects to think through their circumstances and to feel through
their contradictions, and in so doing, to inwardly endure experiences that would otherwise be outwardly unbearable” (Bhiel 2006:14). Instead elaborating cultural expressions of what it means to be Mixteco or reclaiming their indigenous identity as older Mixteco migrants have done in previous research, the youth in this research have articulated subjectivities that disassociate with being Mixteco or indigenous. Often times this is done to escape the teasing and discrimination they experience from their mestizo peers.

**CREATING A BOUNDED MIXTECO COMMUNITY**

Many Mixteco communities in the US have managed to reinvent themselves. The youth in these communities understand their origins as being town specific but this is because they had it taught to them and affirmed through a community, one that was established by older migrants that have managed to reaffirm their own indigenous identities. For instance, in his research with the Mixtecos in Madera, California, Besserer argues that it is not uncommon for a child born in the US to say he is from San Juan Mixtepec, even if he has never been to Oaxaca (1998). Federico Besserer goes on to argue that being a Mixtepense (a Mixteco from San Juan Mixtepec) no longer signifies having been born in San Juan Mixtepec (2002:139). The cultural space or third space created by the Mixteco community in Besserer’s research has allowed the opportunity for the creation of new identities—identities that are “not based on any presumed essential uniqueness of what it is to be Mixteco” (Besserer 2002:181).

Similarly, in his research, Bernardo Rios’ argues that the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles consists of a diasporic identity drawn from their movement into LA and the recreation of a distinct Oaxacan community through basketball (2008:20). In this particular community, basketball is seen as a cultural practice that instills cultural values and develops
community identity. Rios argues that “these basketball tournaments have been a vehicle to transmit a cultural experience and develop a sense of local identity for some and transnational Oaxaqueño identity for others” (2008:54) even for those that were born in the US or have never visited Oaxaca.

Linda Vista has yet to create a bounded community like the ones Besserer and Rios write about. Youth in Linda Vista are still confronted with issues of assimilation and discrimination that continue to erode the importance of their Mixteco cultural identity. The children’s public disassociation with an indigenous identity also influences the way children negotiate their identities at home. The children interviewed in this research recognized that they have a connection to Oaxaca and that their parents are from Oaxaca. Yet, unlike the identities of their parents and other Mixteco migrant adults living in the US, which are closely linked to the transnational topography of a specific hometown in Oaxaca (Besserer 2002), very few children associated where they were “from” with their specific hometown or their parents’ town, especially those that were not born in Oaxaca. Instead, Oaxaca itself became the abstract “hometown” for many of the children. During my visit at a local elementary school, I had a conversation with four third graders that revealed to me their parents speak Mixteco. When I asked if they knew the name of their parents’ town, they responded, “Oaxaca.” I tried to rephrase the question but they repeated their answer, “Oaxaca.”

I observed similar responses at the program where I volunteered. At the beginning of each semester, we would hold an orientation meeting for community members and volunteers, where we would introduce ourselves and say where we were from. The children would respond that they were from Oaxaca and the director would have to continuously ask
each child to say the name of their town. In many instances, the children did not know how to respond and their parents would have to whisper the name of the town in their ear.

Nevertheless, Linda Vista is in the beginning processes of creating a bounded community like the one Besserer talks about. Some of the younger Mixteco members of Linda Vista have begun to take steps in this direction. Four young women in particular, Valentina (29), Julieta (27), Paulina (24), and Norma (23) have begun to tackle the issues they faced growing up in Linda Vista and address their experiences in the US school system.

Moya argues that identities are in a continual process of verification, which takes place over the course of a person’s life through their interaction with the society they live in (2000:83). This has also been the case for these four young women since their articulation of identity remains an ongoing process. Most of their memories are filled with shame and regret and overcoming those feeling has become essential in their ability to reclaim their indigenous identities. Now in their twenties, these women have begun to reflect on their past and challenge concepts that originally made them feel embarrassed about being Mixtecas.

Throughout her school years, Valentina admitted feeling small and insignificant and constantly asked what she had done wrong to be treated so unfairly by her classmates. She felt it was her fault for being Mixteca that she did not speak Spanish correctly. As previously discussed in Chapter 5, it was not until high school when Valentina began to question her “Mexican” identity and tried to embrace her indigenous identity. She began to recognize that she was Mexican but other aspects of her life were uniquely Mixteco, like her language and cultural traditions that differed from mainstream mestizo society.

Valentina’s appreciation of her culture and language did not happen overnight. Valentina herself admits that it has been a very gradual process. After a few years in
community college, Valentina transferred to San Diego State University and it was here where Valentina began to articulate what it meant to be from Oaxaca and to be Mixteca. During her first year, Valentina and a friend took a course in the Latin American Studies department. To her surprise, during one of the lectures, her professor spoke about indigenous cultures and the Mixteco language. Still feeling embarrassed about telling people she spoke Mixteco [“Todavía tenía pena de que descubrieran que hablaba yo mixteco], Valentina’s classmate encouraged her to tell her professor. Valentina finally did and the professor referred her to the Mixteco courses offered by the university. Consequently, Valentina began taking Mixteco language classes at SDSU and it was here that Valentina’s college experience allowed her to slowly embrace what at one point she believed was of no value.

Y luego allí es cuando nació esa inquietud de aprender más el mixteco, como escribirlo. Yo lo sabía hablar y entender. Lo entendía y lo hablaba mas que no lo sabía escribir. Entonces, era…anyways, allí empezó la inquietud, ya nació…okay voy a aprender más y allí nació ese orgullo, ese orgullo mixteco. [Interview February 2009]¹²

Nevertheless, Valentina’s early stages of language appreciation conflicted with her parents’ view on learning and speaking Mixteco. She explained: “Mis papás todavía tenían esa mentalidad de que el mixteco no vale, en ese entonces no valía. No sirve, ¿para qué lo vas a usar, para qué lo estás estudiando?” [My parents still had that mentality that Mixteco was worthless, at that time it wasn’t worth anything. It was no good, what are you going to use it for, why are you studying it?].

Valentina’s interest in her own language and culture motivated her to help her own community in Linda Vista. Using her knowledge of Mixteco, she started helping neighbors

¹² That is where that restlessness to learn more Mixteco was born, to learn how to write it. I understood it and I could speak it but I did not know how to write it. So, it was…anyways, that’s where that restlessness, it was born…okay I am going to learn more and that is where that pride was born, pride in being Mixteco.
read and translate their mail. Valentina’s parents soon noticed her involvement with the Mixteco community and recognized the benefits of helping members of her community. Valentina’s actions also influenced Julieta and Norma to (re)learn Mixteco while college. Similarly, Julieta and Norma’s family challenged their desire to learn Mixteco. Norma explained:

It’s funny ‘cause Julie, even my family, okay, even though my parents they speak Mixteco, when she first told my older brothers, I’m learning Mixteco, they were like, why are you learning Mixteco? You should be learning another language, you know. And she’s like, well we don’t speak it. If you really think about it we don’t speak it. We don’t know how to write it. Why not? Why can’t I learn my own language, like if I understand it already. They said it differently, you know. It goes back to that shame, you know, of what they went through. And I would ask my siblings like, how come you don’t speak it no more and they’re like, we were laughed at, you know. Nobody values that language and it’s just yeah if you go to Oaxaca, en el pueblo [you would use it]. [Interview July 2009]

Nevertheless, Norma and Julieta’s family began recognize Valentina’s efforts to help the Mixteco community in San Diego:

They started realizing that after Valentina got job offers for being a translator, they were like, Oh! They started realizing, you know. ‘Cause if you really think about it there’s a lot of people from Oaxaca. It’s like basically the whole town in here, you know. So do you like really need it now? And like, yeah you do. [Interview July 2009]

Several years later, Paulina has been able to reflect on her own childhood. Her exposure to different points of view in college has also allowed her to critically examine why she felt ashamed to be Mixteca. Although she is resentful about her past, she has slowly begun to embrace what she used to hide from others. She is currently taking Mixteco language classes at SDSU and plans to travel to Oaxaca for the Mixteco summer intensive course. In her words:

I started meeting other people that were nicer and then college…I think that when I was like really proud to be from Oaxaca. I don’t know, it’s like, I have an identity and I can say that I’m from here and I’m proud to say it. I remember how ashamed I was. How foolish could I have been to be ashamed of the place that I
was born? It makes me feel mad in a way that I was ashamed but then again, I guess, I was forced to be. [Interview February 2009]

The positive reactions the young women encountered in college significantly affected the way they negotiated their identity and affirmed their culture and language. Moreover, this reaffirmation of identity is central to the creating of Familia Indigena Unida and the Mixteco Cultural Exchange program in Linda Vista. Valentina and Julieta, the directors of the program, explained that it was out of their own experiences they found the need to develop such a program. Even as the program has progressed, Julieta admitted that working with the children has made her want to learn Mixteco. Not only would learning Mixteco allow her to help more people but Julieta also recognized that “It would just identify me more as a Mixteca.” Julieta explained that she identifies with many of the children she works with in the program:

I just can identify the way that you are really shy when you come first, like feel like really shy you don’t want to talk…it’s really hard to help them to be more open or be initiative so that’s really hard I think for the kids when they come here and sometimes the teacher doesn’t understand that, it’s like ‘she’s so quiet’ but they don’t understand why probably because of the language and the culture. [Interview February 2009]

Norma’s involvement with the Linda Vista community also highlighted the importance of valuing her own culture. She realized there was a significant number of Mixteco students in the local schools and was disappointed that she was not able to communicate with them or their parents in Mixteco:

I wasn’t able to communicate. I’m like, Oh my God! I understand everything they are saying but I can’t communicate, so I was like, how sad! That made me realize, value it more, you know, with the kids. I saw myself in them, you know. They were embarrassed, they were embarrassed to speak the language and that’s when I was like no, you don’t have to be embarrassed, you know, it’s a language. And it’s up to you if you want to educate others or not, you know but you don’t have to be ashamed of it, you know. If you wanna speak it, go ahead and you shouldn’t be laughed at, you know. It’s when it hit me the most, I think. [Interview July 2009].
The Familia Indigena Unida’s Mixteco Cultural Exchange has focused on the exchange of language and culture. Unlike other transnational organizations that are directly linked to a specific hometown in Oaxaca, this program centers on the community of Linda Vista and its immediate needs. Valentina believes that the program’s appreciation for the Mixteco language and culture can lead to the empowerment of the Mixteco community in Linda Vista.

Moreover, the programs’ objective for the Mixteco language component is to turn the Mixteco students into teachers of their own language. From my initial observations, there were mixed feelings on behalf of the community members about the Mixteco language component. Some participants, especially the younger adults, were indeed excited to learn about the language they once spoke or that their parents spoke. Yet, others, like the older participants did not immediately embrace the idea, particularly because they felt they could not contribute to the lesson. This is an example of the continued perceptions many people have about their indigenous culture and language. I learned that many participants did not believe their knowledge of the Mixteco language represented a valuable aspect within the program. They were there to learn English and Spanish, languages that to them seemed more worthwhile to learn. As I have previously discussed, these perceptions are the result of centuries of oppression and they are difficult to change. Nevertheless, after participating in the program for over two years, I have noticed an evolving sense of pride among the participants. Within my own Spanish class, I noticed that my efforts to learn and speak Mixteco affected the way my students felt about their native language. Women that were previously very reserved began to actively participate during the Mixteco component of the class and others assumed the role of the teacher during class time.
The mothers I spoke with also expressed their appreciation for their children’s Mixteco lessons. Amelia, for instance, explained that prior to attending the program her son refused to speak Mixteco. Yet, after participating in the program for over a year, her son has become interested in learning the language and this makes her very happy. Consequently, Amelia has tried to instill a sense of ethnic pride in her son. In her words:

Hay niños que se ríen de él, que no quieren decir, ‘yo soy de Oaxaca.’ Muchos niños, su familia es de Oaxaca…pero niño que nazca aquí ya no son de Oaxaca, están todos mudos, ya no dicen que son de Oaxaca. Y yo le dije, por qué te da pena, mijo? No te de pena, estamos todos igual, somos de Oaxaca. Tu vas a decir, ‘soy de Tijuana,’ naciste en Tijuana pero tu mamá es de Oaxaca, tienes sangre de allá. [Interview July 2009] 13

The Mixteco Cultural Exchange, especially the Mixteco language component, has significantly influenced the participants’ own view on their Mixteco identities. Although the success is slow moving, the program’s efforts have begun to counteract the negative experiences the children in this research have faced in school with their mestizo peers. The Mixteco Cultural Exchange program has become an important step towards creating a more bounded Mixteco community in Linda Vista.

The way Valentina, Julieta, Paulina, and Norma have negotiated their identity has also contributed to Linda Vista’s attempts to build a bounded community. For Valentina, Familia Indígena Unida and the Mixteco Cultural Exchange represent a place where both children and adults have the opportunity to see their language and culture in a positive light,

13 There are children that laugh at him, that don’t want to say, ‘I am from Oaxaca.’ Many children, their families are from Oaxaca…but the child that is born here doesn’t say he is from Oaxaca, they are all mute they don’t want to say they are from Oaxaca. And I told him, why are you embarrassed, son? Don’t be ashamed, we are all the same, we are from Oaxaca. You are going to say, ‘I am from Tijuana,’ you were born there but your mother is from Oaxaca and you have blood from there.
one that goes against the historically oppressive discourse many have been subject to. In her words:

Entonces creo que es importante tener clases o talleres o por lo menos identificar tal niño con su cultura, con su identidad y valorar ese niño, respetar ese niño y no burlarse de un niño porque eso…burlarse de un niño por ser una identidad, cierta identidad, tener…ser de una cultura pues, como que le cierras la puerta a ese niño, como que pues le da pena, a la otra ya no va decir que es mixteco porque alguien se burló de él o de ella. Entonces, creo que es importante valorar cada niño de acuerdo con su cultura y también darle la oportunidad de que conozca otras culturas y que se sienta bien y no juzgar las otras culturas. Si uno se siente bien de donde es pues, respetar y valorar las otras culturas. [Interview February 2009]}

So what caused this positive identification shift for these four young women? From their narratives, they attributed this shift to the positive feedback they received in college from teachers and classmates about their parents’ culture and the language they spoke or used to speak at home. However, it is significant to point out that this happened in a university setting and only very recently. They were exposed to social science classes that for the first time addressed some of their experiences. Unlike the subtractive schooling practices during K-12, the cultural aspects that set them apart from the general mestizo identity turned into source of interest for professors and classmates, which supports the idea that valuing a student’s culture and language leads to positive self-identification. When a school affirms the value of a student’s language and encourages them to take pride in their culture, it goes against the escalating societal discourse proclaiming that bilingualism and biculturalism shuts doors and disadvantages both the individual and the wider society (Cummins 1996).

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14 So I think it is important to have classes or workshops or at least identify a child with his culture, with his identity and value that child, respect that child and not make fun of him because teasing a child because of his identity closes a door for that child, it makes him embarrassed and then next time he will no longer say he is Mixteco because someone made fun of him. So, I think it is important to value each child according to their culture and give them the opportunity to learn about other cultures and that they feel good and not judge other cultures. If someone feels good about where they are from they will respect and value other cultures.
So what about the children who are currently undergoing a process of negotiation?
Will they have to attend college just so they can reconnect with their culture and language?
The stories of Valentina and the other women are not as common as we would like to believe. In many cases, the historically subtractive schooling process does not prepare many indigenous students to be eligible to enter college (Valenzuela 2002). College may also be less accessible for English language learners, especially with the United States’ current language acquisition policies and high school exit exams. Still, whether or not a student goes to college, why not start the positive self-identification sooner? Valentina and Julieta, the creators of Familia Indígena Unida and the Mixteco Cultural Exchange have begun to take steps in this direction. However, in order to create a bounded community or cultural space that allows for the creation of new Mixteco identities that previous scholars have written about, the experiences of Mixteco youth growing up in Linda Vista must be addressed beyond the Mixteco community, particularly within the local schools.

During an interview at a local elementary school in Linda Vista, a third grade teacher (who is originally from Peru) explained to me that because the school’s population was mainly “Latino”, they did not have any problems with racism or discrimination. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case for most children growing up in Linda Vista, including the Mixteco students in this teacher’s classroom who shared with me stories about shame and teasing. The school system, much like US society, has been inclined to essentialize people who come from Mexico and assume they are all Spanish-speaking mestizos which similar backgrounds. However, this is far from the current reality and as this study argues, society’s lack of cultural understanding and essentializing nature ends up excluding the voice and concerns of Mixteco students and their families. The narratives of
the Mixteco youth in this research reveal that the experiences inside the classroom are powerful influences in the way they perceive their own culture and language. Not only are children carrying with them their historically marginalized status within the Mexican migrant community but they are also embedded within an already existing framework of ethnic and linguistic discrimination in the US.

Therefore, the commitment to helping students requires the willingness of schools and educators to challenge historical patterns of oppression (Cummins 1996). Before schools can attempt to incorporate students’ language and culture in the classroom to set the stage for empowerment, it is imperative to recognize the historical background of indigenous discrimination and how the experiences and powerful memories of Mixteco youth end up shaping their own views on Mixteco culture and language. Rather than essentializing the experiences of Mixteco students with “Latino” or Mexican students in the United States, schools must first recognize the historical background of indigenous discrimination and how Mixteco students must negotiate their identity against an already existing Mexican mestizo identity.

Creating a culturally diverse classroom is not an easy task particularly because subtractive schooling has been so deeply embedded within our education system. Although creating culturally diverse curriculum and culturally sensitive teachers may seem to be a difficult process, when taking a closer look at the personal narratives of students it is indeed unfair to disregard the negative effects of subjective schooling on the students’ self-esteem and self-identification. In order for schools to create a culturally inclusive classroom, it is central to recognize that the experiences of Mixteco children would not necessarily reflect the same experiences of the generalized Latino population or Mexican mestizo students. This
particular issue needs to be addressed not only in school curriculum and but especially within teacher credential programs and requires ongoing teacher trainings within school districts. Being knowledgeable about students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds could also allow a teacher to recognize and hopefully prevent the type of teasing endured by many Mixteco students in this research. Thus, the power teachers possess is crucial in creating an space where children feel accepted and not ashamed about their language, culture, and background.

**Final Thoughts**

Given the current intensification of anti-immigrant legislation, such as the recently passed bill, SB 1070 in Arizona, the manufactured immigration crisis deeply affects the Mixteco community discussed in this research. Aside from the US educational system’s lack of cultural awareness and the discrimination from mestizo migrants, many Mixteco families are also forced to live in fear and the opportunities for their children are becoming more limited simply because of their place of birth. Some families, including one of the families interviewed in this research, have had to move back to Mexico because of the continued presence and harassment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in their community. In those cases, what happens to those children? Particularly, what happens to the children who do not speak Spanish and have a closer connection to San Diego than any place in Mexico? These issues create possible avenues for future research to address anti-immigrant and racist policies and their effect on indigenous migrant communities.

The purpose of this thesis is not to say that children need to learn their parents’ native language nor do they need to identify as Mixtecos, especially because that would be paternalistic and the last thing an oppressed group needs is to be told what they need or what they ought to do. The objective of this research rather was to listen to the stories people
share about their experiences as individuals and as a collective. This ethnographic study takes a look at how the powerful memories of social encounters and experiences significantly shape a person’s self-understanding. It is in their narratives that the youth reveal how the pervasiveness of ethnic discrimination manifests itself beyond Mexico and is reworked into the United States’ already existing framework of ethnic and linguistic discrimination.

The principal goal of this thesis has been to create greater awareness about a group that is often underrepresented within many contexts, including the educational discourse. This research is an attempt to merge indigenous dialogues with the existing discourse about culturally diverse students in the US. It is also important for non-indigenous people, including mestizos, to understand the unique experiences of indigenous people, particularly indigenous youth growing up in the US because their experiences are very different to that of their parents who migrated as adults to the United States. The narratives in this study convey emotional and painful experiences and memories that do not deserve to be overlooked or co-opted.
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