# Language education injustices in Mexican indigenous communities during COVID-19 pandemic

*Lorena Córdova-Hernández, Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca*

*Jorge Valtierra Zamudio, Universidad La Salle, México*

*In Mexico, due to the pandemic caused by COVID 2019, most students have received remote education through public television channels and video calls via payment internet services. Although these practices can provide helpful strategies for students to continue with their school training process, the distance education modality began to demonstrate the social inequalities most students find themselves in. This situation has increased students' social and educational disparities in the South of Mexico. In that case, many indigenous communities are good examples of language education injustices before the pandemic, which has become a more critical situation during and after the pandemic. For instance, classes are only in Spanish; some indigenous teachers do not speak the language or community language variety. There has also been a lack of teachers for more than a year in different schools. Based on endangered indigenous languages experiences, in this paper, we aim to reflect on the notion of the school as a space for the democratisation of knowledge. However, in indigenous contexts, one can see critical social injustice conditions for students instead of democratisation of knowledge, as we said before. For that reason, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is only an issue and a minuscule particle to show the historical and structural language education injustices for indigenous people. Hitherto, it is necessary to recognise this situation all the time.*

Keywords:    language education, social justice, indigenous education, endangered languages
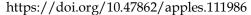
## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the social and educational inequality of students globally. However, these educational gaps deepen in indigenous communities. Home to more than 500 indigenous peoples, Latin America is a crucial example of this situation. In this region, indigenous educational institutions have less infrastructure, administrative organisations and technological coverage than institutions serving non-indigenous or *mestizo* populations. In this way, "indigenous education [is a] monocultural school education used as a means for the colonisation and integration of indigenous peoples by national states" (Saveedra & Quilaqueo, 2021, p. 2).

There have been educational and linguistic policies towards the indigenous population in the Mexican case for four decades. As a result, different models have been developed that seek to provide culturally relevant scholarly attention that fosters the development of bilingualism in the population (Hamel, 2016). However, ideologies surrounding the integration of the indigenous population into national dynamics, which were expanded through educational policies to favour language displacement since the 1940s, continue to exist. Mexican language policy has reinforced the discourse on multilingualism and interculturality since 2000. But "economic inequality, cultural domination, and imparity of political participation" (Piller, 2016, p. 5) are the main factors to linguistic diversity displacement and educational injustice.

In the country's southern region, where most indigenous peoples live, "societal injustice is manifested in many ways. Race and poverty, historically companion problems, mirror the impact of unjust political and social systems" (Burkemper & Stretch, 2012, p. 3). The conditions of vulnerability and exclusion experienced by the indigenous education sector (teachers, students, and parents) do not increase the indicators set out in the national education standards, which promote exclusion.

This situation leads to school desertion and low access to higher levels of education, as these do not coincide with the needs and realities of these cultural and linguistic groups. "Language is a central concern in contemporary conversations surrounding social justice as evident in issues as diverse bilingual education" (Avineri et al., 2019, p. 1). Consequently, we can affirm that many indigenous communities are good examples of language education injustices that elementary education students met before the COVID-19 pandemic and have become critical during and after the pandemic.

In this paper, we offer a reflection based on literature and illustrated with examples from ethnographic observation in indigenous communities from Chiapas and Oaxaca (Mexico). In particular, we aim to discuss the notion of the school as a space for social justice through knowledge democratisation. Nevertheless, in indigenous contexts, social injustice conditions for students have historical, racial, structural, and economic conditions that do not motivate the construction of social justice environments. For that reason, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is only an issue and a minuscule particle to show the historical and structural language education injustices for indigenous people. Also, the closing of schools changed the dynamics of families. In some of them, the cancellation of classes was the best condition to reinforce the transmission of cultural knowledge because the members spent more time interacting with one another.

## 2 Theory and research context

### 2.1 Social justice and education

Social justice is a search for the establishment of peace based on equal distribution and the construction of different legislations, organisms and strategies that motivate to improve, guarantee, and protect all social groups. Its thematic development can be found in John Rawls' book Theory of Justice (1971) postulates, which refers to the principles of justice that defend human rights (Venslauskaitė, 1999). However, one of the most critical developments in the field, which this paper follows, is the work of Amartya Sen, whose postulate is that the establishment of justice requires a diagnosis or detection of the network of existing injustices.

> Justice is not a matter of reasoning at all; it is one of being appropriately sensitive and having the right nose for injustice […]. Furthermore, cases of injustices may be much more complex and subtle than the assessment of an observable calamity. The requirements of a theory justice include bringing reason into play diagnosis of justice and injustice (Sen, 2009, pp. 3-4)

In this sense, to propose justice processes, it is necessary to analyse in a critical and situated manner the multifactorial characteristics of injustice and social vulnerability in which any group finds itself. For example, the indigenous peoples of Mexico, since the 16th century, have assimilated and confronted the social dynamics and cultures imposed by the colonisation process. However, it was not until the 1920s that the ideology of building a homogeneous nation appeared. The proposal was that indigenous groups displaced their specific cultural traits. As a result, it helped construct a mestizo society that considered these people part of a mythical past, generating more significant social injustices.

In this way, a Mexican post-racial ideology has been established and "mestizaje solidifies into a form of nationalist denial in moments when racism is openly contested or brought up. It becomes a concrete strategy of power that is mobilised to simplify or divert attention in particular moments" (Moreno & Saldívar, 2016, p. 516). The school has been the best place to impulse this ideology to impulse it. Mexico is a democratic state based on equality and social freedom (Baynes, 2019). Also, it is a Nation that recognises multiculturalism and linguistic diversity. However, in this context, the indigenous population does not receive cultural and linguistic relevant education and continues to live in conditions of vulnerability.

In recent decades, social organisations, governmental institutions, and universities have increased their efforts to join forces to generate the conditions and strategies necessary for all social groups to obtain and enjoy everything that, by human rights, corresponds to them. Therefore, issues such as poverty should be framed as social justice (Clément, 2018). In that respect, if problems of social inequity — stemming from environmental injustices, colonisation, poverty, racism, among others — are expanded, its attention should be directed to processes and initiatives in favour of social justice, which is concerned with "striving for dignity" (Lowen & Pollard, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, it includes "those social and economic rights which are often relegated to a status of lesser importance" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2020, p. 1).

It is essential to clarify that justice problems are not solved through economic distribution and redistribution processes but rather through the construction of equity, recognition, and diversity inclusion. In this sense, one of the universal policies to achieve this is formal education from childhood. However, although there is a general understanding of what is involved in generating and implementing educational strategies, the diversity of contexts, groups, and needs means that research into the scope and challenges faced by each country, region, or community is becoming increasingly specialised. Within this specialisation, the issue of educational equity is a research proposal and research problem. Also, it is a process that "means that students should have equal opportunities to achieve their optimal abilities without being restricted by their community background or dispositional characteristics" (Ling & Nasri, 2019, p. 3163). That is, universal educational policies have begun to be evaluated and observed from the characteristics of the students or beneficiaries of these educational processes.

According to Social Justice Education (SJE) — defined as "the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple

social identity groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability), foster critical perspectives, and promote social action" (Carlisle et al., 2006, p. 57) — education needs to promote fundamental human rights, where students can bring about social change and accept cultural differences. Moreover, economic and material inequalities are challenged, so students should be active democratic citizens (Grant & Gibson, 2013). From the development of specific analyses, the issue of education and equal opportunities for children begins to be problematised from axes such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, disabilities, methodologies, and others.

> [Mel Ainscow mentions that] inclusion and equity require an effective strategy for implementation. It requires new thinking which focuses attention on the barriers experienced by some children that lead them to become marginalised because of contextual factors. The implication is that overcoming such obstacles is the most important means of developing forms of education that are effective for all children. In this way, inclusion becomes a way of achieving the overall improvement of education systems (Ainscow, 2020, p. 8).

It is not enough to have schools, teachers, and administrative staff to teach the classes. It is indispensable to include learning strategies and dynamics that address and respond to the cultural and social diversity of the target population. It is also important to note that, although there are international and national educational policies, each context and each social process in which the immersion student community directly influences the functions of equity and the construction of a fairer society. In Mexico, however, indigenous peoples are the social groups that experience the most significant social and educational inequity.

Consequently, if education is a way to build fairer societies, these groups' linguistic and cultural diversity continues to be displaced and is a reason for exclusion. In these cases, the criterion of justice is ambiguous and even non-existent. Although the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the inequity in educational processes (teaching-learning) and stopped the linguistic revitalisation methods developed in these spaces, it is essential to remember that these processes of displacement and exclusion already existed before the pandemic.

## 2.2 Language education and endangered languages

Formal education is one of the governmental institutions in which most financial and human resources are invested. Consequently, many expectations are placed on it to construct social equality. However, educational contexts are diverse, and, in some cases, schools are the spaces of socialisation in which peace can occur. In other contexts, as in the case of indigenous communities in Mexico, schools and formal education have been a space where racism and social exclusion have materialised.

In the Mexican context, indigenous peoples are identified in governmental and socio-political terms based on their language. Although some languages are in critical situations of displacement, it serves to identify the members of an ethnic group. In this way, educational policies aimed at the indigenous population will emphasise language issues to strengthen the standardised use of Spanish and generate bilingual educational proposals. In this way, to refer to education for indigenous peoples is to refer to how languages are used or deployed in students' social interaction and learning processes. Therefore, it is not possible to refer to educational justice and injustice towards indigenous peoples if we do not consider

"the intersection of language, education, and social justice [that] illustrate the existence of social hierarchies of power as well as the ideological assumptions that maintain them" (Avineri et al., 2019, p. 61).

Since the 1940s, the federal government scattered the ideology that language diversity was an obstacle to the country's development. Therefore, governmental actors started the implementation of linguistic and educational policies to homogenise the population. These policies focused on two general processes. 1) Developing bilingualism (indigenous language-Spanish) that gradually allowed the displacement of these languages in many communities. 2) Generating literacy processes in Spanish to provide the indigenous population with basic skills (reading and writing) (De León, 2016).

In the first half of the 20th century, Latin American governments considered linguistic and cultural diversity an obstacle to their countries' development. In Mexico, schools, as ideological state apparatuses, set in motion the process of "inclusion of the Indian into the nation" (Korsbaek & Sámano-Rentería, 2004). School and formal education during most of the 20th century was a space in which, through the Spanish literacy of students of indigenous origin, all cultural traits that diversified society were displaced. The teaching of Spanish was privileged as the means to achieve this *inclusion policy*.

> Among the pending issues of Mexican democracy, the deficit in the political inclusion of indigenous peoples, one of the most marginalised and excluded sectors of the country, stands out. There is now a clear normative consensus regarding this issue, since it is widely recognised that the participation and representation of indigenous peoples is essential for their inclusion (Sonnleitner, 2020, p. 2).

The conditions of exclusion and marginalisation are more robust as a result of a racist ideology surrounding indigenous peoples and their languages. As a result, many families and communities have chosen to displace the use and transmission of their tongues. Therefore, currently, students who speak an indigenous language in urban or rural schools are exceptions to the rule and actors in resistance. The tendency is that young people and children are no longer speakers of these languages at school where the academic and communicative language is Spanish.

Since 2000, the national language policy towards recognising linguistic diversity has been strengthened in Mexico. However, the trend towards linguistic displacement has been significant. For example, in the 1930s, more than 15% of the total national population (over five years of age) was recognised as indigenous. On the other hand, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, in the year 2020, only 6.2% of the national population recognised themselves as speakers of an indigenous language (NISG, 2020). These percentages allow us to state that indigenous languages are today *endangered languages*.

> Language endangerment may be caused primarily by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. It may also be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language or by a general decline of group identity. Internal pressures always derive from external factors. Together, they halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions (Brenzinger & de Graaf, 2006, p. 240).

The threatening situation in which languages find themselves has to do with discrimination. For instance, language displacement is a communicative process of several decades of discrimination and exclusion consequently. Therefore, it is a process that must not be a linguistic matter. That is why the formal education gotten in schools is fundamental.

## 2.3 Educational models for indigenous people

Mexico transitioned from a Bilingual Bicultural Education Model to a Bilingual Intercultural Education Model. However, as Enrique Hamel (2016) states,

> The indigenous schools reproduce this general tendency, mainly through the diglossic ideologies of the indigenous school teachers who value Spanish and Spanish literacy as their most precious cultural capital, whereas their own native languages are not considered suitable for academic activities. They share, by and large, the nationalist values of a common nation-state that promises upward mobility through a school system of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Consequently, they attempt to teach literacy in Spanish from first grade onto students who are at best incipient bilinguals, instead of developing cognitively demanding higher-order discourses such as literacy in their mother tongue (p. 400).

In this way, educational models and linguistic policies have changed, but social and academic interaction contexts continue to reproduce ideologies for linguicism. In most cases, students, teachers, administrators, and parents who participate in the educational process are bilingual (indigenous language-Spanish). But their bilingualism is subtractive because it displaces the indigenous language and privileges Spanish.

Formal education is one of the ways to achieve social change in favour of building fairer societies. However, in the case of Mexican indigenous peoples, the school is a space in which languages are in a threatening situation. In the academic areas in which students speaking an indigenous language interact, it continues to be a process by which indigenous languages have a low social status. Unfortunately, this status continues to be justified by the racialised ideology that rarely recognises learners' cognitive and creative abilities. In addition, this racial justification around indigenous languages and their speakers adheres to an economic perspective. In this, indigenous peoples are poor or poor because their way of life does not coincide with that of non-indigenous groups. Also, they cannot have a better economic income because they do not speak "correct" Spanish.

> From a raciolinguistic perspective it is, therefore, insufficient to promote additive bilingualism without also recognising that regardless of how additive the bilingualism of low-income students from racialised backgrounds may be, their linguistic expertise has not been valued in the same way as that of those developing their expertise in contexts of elite multilingualism and, without broader institutional transformation, will continue to be framed as a problem that needs remediation (Flores & Rosas, 2019, p. 146).

The bilingualism promoted in Mexico is Spanish-English. However, this has better results in private schools. Therefore, not all Mexican citizens are bilingual, and

those who are bilingual but in other languages, as is the case of the indigenous population, are discriminated against.

Multilingual educational contexts build social justice initiatives for the development of "the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability), foster critical perspectives, and promote social action" (Reilly et al. 2006, p. 57). Furthermore, this process depends not only on the change of an educational model but also on a whole social structural process in which indigenous and non-indigenous people can participate. That is, where social justice education allows incentive "process and goal that allow for the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Francis & le Roux, 2011, p. 301).

In the daily life of indigenous communities, formal education is not an option for a fair future. Although schools in the communities can receive governmental economic support, many students of indigenous origin drop out of studying when they finish their primary education (Preschool/Elementary school). Higher educational level schools (Middle school/High school) are located outside the communities, and attending them generates new economic expenses (Schmelkes & Ballesteros, 2022). In addition, many adolescents stop studying to start working and, in a significant percentage, migrate to the country's large cities or the United States of America. For example, all Mexican citizens have the right to primary and secondary education (compulsory education system), but education for indigenous people is based on Intercultural Bilingual Education. However, this model is provided only in pre-school and primary school. Secondary education only exists in the general model. Intercultural universities and baccalaureate have also emerged in the last two decades.

In addition, it is essential to present some percentages in terms of social justice. According to the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2018), almost 31 million children and adolescents enrolled in compulsory education at the national level. Also, 9% of enrolment and 15.2 % of schools were in indigenous municipalities. But these figures are not encouraging when compared with percentages that refer to social injustice. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), in Mexico, 9.5 % of indigenous pre-schools did not have teachers who spoke at least one of their community's mother tongues. Chiapas had the highest proportion: 21.7 %, and 8.3 % of all indigenous primary schools lacked a teacher who spoke at least one indigenous language. More than 90% of all primary education schools and students were in high and very high marginalisation localities. There was no indigenous education in localities with less than 500 inhabitants.

According to Stefano Sartorello (2019, pp. 9–10), the processes of schooling in indigenous education in pre-school and elementary school show:

a) the persistence of a teaching practice that privileges the use of Spanish;
b) the contradictions faced by teachers in teaching both languages when the conditions for indigenous children's continuity in secondary school and the following levels only recognise oral and written proficiency in Spanish, in addition to the lack of indigenous or intercultural and bilingual education after primary school;
c) the linguistic misplacement of teachers assigned to indigenous primary and pre-school education;

d) the inequity of the educational and training paths of teachers assigned to education in the indigenous environment;
e) the persistent discrimination against children and teachers for being speakers of indigenous languages;
f) the school system's denial of the knowledge and cultural practices of indigenous peoples;
g) the lack of infrastructure and essential services in most indigenous schools is inequitably higher than the national average.

Even though the country's indigenous population has increasingly higher literacy rates (reading and writing) in Spanish, this process is truncated when most students are adolescents. Furthermore, formal education and its benefits for social justice are not achieved by learning to read and write. It fails to equip the population with equitable and culturally relevant participation tools. Therefore, the indigenous peoples face social and educational injustices. If primary education presented unfavourable situations for constructing a social justice process within indigenous communities in southern Mexico, the COVID-19 pandemic had an important influence on educational dynamics. However, this did not negatively impact children from some local or community perspectives.

## 3 National education policies during COVID-19

For many decades, the educational conditions and proposals for indigenous peoples have presented structural and social difficulties that do not encourage the construction of social justice, mainly because the displacement of languages and cultural practices is accelerating. Even though educational models for teaching and teacher training have modified many of their proposals to favour cultural diversity, it is crucial to recognise that school spaces have become good allies to language revitalisation in recent years. For instance, the instruction language is only Spanish. Also, some indigenous teachers do not speak the language or community language variety; there is also a lack of teachers for more than a year in different schools in other communities, and most teachers work in multi-grade groups.

The precariousness of the school infrastructure and linguistic dislocation are two conditions that promote inequality and educational injustice. However, the organisation in multi-grade groups can also be a negative factor. Although, in pedagogical terms, it has been shown that multi-grade groups are suitable for the inter-learning processes between children of different ages, "in all cases, at least one teacher in the multi-grade schools' functions as director. This situation takes time away from their teaching activities. They [also] operate in small communities with high marginalisation, and the poverty of supply meets the poverty of demand so that the results are also poor" (Schmelkes & Aguila, 2019, pp. 16–15).

In addition, it is essential to mention that indigenous education teachers in the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas have a trade union organisation that has resisted the imposition of homogenising educational models for several decades (Ameglio et al., 2018). Therefore, in these states, teachers have organised themselves to generate alternative education strategies that favour the development of indigenous languages and cultures in schools. Unfortunately, however, these proposals do not manage to be widely implemented. On the contrary, they often become sporadic exercises that do not transcend the political and social educational structure of the

Castilianising education system. As a result, educational injustices continue to be present in the everyday lives of indigenous academic communities.

Undoubtedly, educational inequities worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in the Mexican case, began with the cancellation of face-to-face classes in mid-March 2020 and has begun with a gradual return in August 2021. According to the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, during the 2020–2021 school year, 25 680 370 students were registered. Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, students received distance education through public television channels and video calls by payment for internet services. Although these actions can be helpful strategies for students to go on with their school training process, the distance education modality began to demonstrate the social inequalities most students find themselves in. For example, not everyone has a personal electronic device and internet service to attend classes and work on their homework in urban environments. In addition, the change in family dynamics has meant that many children do not have the guidance of an adult at home to support them during the educational process.

On 14 March 2020, the head of the Ministry of Public Education, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, announced that the school spring break (Easter), which usually lasts two weeks, would be extended by one week (from 23 March to 17 April). This plan was a preventive isolation plan because of the spread of COVID-19 worldwide. In addition, the Mexican population was encouraged not to leave their homes to take holidays and suspended non-essential physical activities: civic, sporting, artistic, festive, among others. Although there were no indications that COVID-19 had infected any sector of the Mexican population by that date, it was hoped that any spread of the disease in schools where children, young people, and adults gather could be avoided.

By March, although there was no health emergency, within the document *Coronavirus Education Sector Provisions (COVID-19)* (Disposiciones del sector educativo ante Coronavirus (COVID-19) the Mexican Ministry of Public Education already considered Remote Education. This document already considered *Remote education* (Educación a Distancia). "[To establish] a system of electronic and digital distance education, for the recovery of learning content" (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2020). It is crucial to recognise that by March 2020, it was not considered to extend to social distancing. It was also vital to decree this period of distance because the spring holidays coincide with religious festivities of Catholic affiliation that bring together many people in Mexico. In the case of many indigenous communities, these festivities are of utmost importance, which is why a very different and peculiar dynamic was generated by social distancing (Valtierra & Córdova-Hernández, 2021).

The first decree of social distancing did not take the educational community by surprise, as it was thought to be a long holiday like the summer holidays. In other words, there was no concern about making up classes remotely because the subjects could be interwoven into the content once face-to-face classes returned on 20 April 2020. However, in coordination with public television institutions, the education authorities launched the *Learn at Home TV programme* from 23 March to 17 April 2020. Thus, students would have a learning option, and the period of isolation would not be considered a holiday.

Thus, in a somewhat haphazard way, every school and teacher in urban areas began to promote, in addition to the use of the governmental programme, classes by video call and homework submissions by email. Unfortunately, there is no

internet service in the case of most indigenous populations. Almost all indigenous schools cancelled lessons (classes) between April 2020-July 2020. While there were attempts by some teachers to provide students with weekly or face-to-face activities, the school year (2019–2020) was closed as of March 2020.

The pandemic continued, and deaths were on the rise in urban and rural areas to be a health emergency. In some cases, only one family member died, but in other cases, entire families died. However, for the start of the school year (August 2020–July 2021), the Ministry of Public Education again attempted to return to classes in August following the *National Strategy for the Safe Return to Basic Education Schools*. In response, in August 2021 it published the document *Learn at Home: resources for blended learning* (Aprende en Casa: recursos para el aprendizaje en la modalidad mixta).

> [This document] provides an overview of the different tools that this Strategy offers and its usefulness in the generation of the attention plan. Among the advantages of using it is the availability of programming for the entire 2021-2022 school year. In addition, the possibility of having the files for each class in editable format for the whole of the school year and access to the classes broadcast videos in the 2020–2021 school year (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2021).

The Federal Government responded that to solve the impossibility of returning to classes can be evaluated as correct if it considers that it favoured sanitation and the development of new technological supports for educational activities. However, more than a year and seven months later, the strategies have been evaluated by different state and civil society organisations.

For example, in September 2021, the following results were published.

> Although the Strategy provided was a timely response to the pandemic and the closure of schools, the speed and flexibility with which it had to be modelled, implemented and adapted meant that it began its implementation without a precise definition of its design, which told that it was necessary to adjust its operation to respond to the needs that gave rise to it. The analysis identified that Aprende en Casa had made progress in defining its design, interventions, and institutional articulation mechanisms. However, it also found that there are still challenges for its consolidation, mainly in terms of the processes to improve the contents of the distance education offer and the pedagogical action of teachers. The Strategy generated a large amount of educational material that fostered the development of new pedagogical and learning skills and interaction mechanisms in the school community, contributing to short and medium-term education. However, it is recommended to strengthen it to take advantage of these new resources and materials to complement and support the National Education System. (Consejo Nacional de Evaluacion de la Politica de Desarrollo Social [Coneval], 2021).

While the learn at home strategy was a quick response, it revealed several gaps and challenges in urban and rural areas that are not limited to technological resources.

For example, one of the first concerns of educational staff, parents, and society, in general, was that students did not have computers, tablets and mobile phones, which presented a challenge to participate in distance classes via video calls. An important aspect is that most households have a television, either because families

have acquired them or because some programmes have distributed them among the poor population through different initiatives before the pandemic. Thus, even if there was a television in every household, television is an entertainment tool, not an educational device. In that sense, the problem was not just having the technological tools but using them as an educational medium. The problem then becomes more acute because not only do students have to be trained in the use of technology as an educational tool, but also teachers, who in many cases had not used some educational tools that, at the time, became necessary.

The use of mobile phones in indigenous communities is increasingly widespread. However, they used it to communicate or share everyday items with family members who have migrated. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most mobile phones were not used as tools for developing educational dynamics.

> The reality shows us that the different populations are facing this pandemic with high levels of poverty and deficient levels of social development, where a lacking health system is visible, a rural and indigenous education system with solid problems that prevent it from participating in the national digital education strategy and different digital divides that are exacerbated by the need to be informed and connected, and what is worse is that this set of inequalities is maximised in times of Covid-19 while adhering to a historical continuum of marginalisation that does not envisage easy ways out (Gómez & Martínez, 2020).

Therefore, many teachers, both those living in the communities where they work and those living outside the wards, opted to hand out weekly workbooks to parents for children to do at home. The following week, the teachers received the workbooks with the completed homework and handed out the new assignment. In didactic terms, the Strategy developed by the indigenous education teachers was probably not the most adequate, as the teaching-learning process in the form of dialogue did not occur.

## 4 Examples of educational processes

In the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, educational processes have always been complex, not only because of the political and social tensions in the region but also because it has not been possible to establish an educational process that prioritises cultural particularities. Yet, contradictorily, in terms of national standards, the indigenous communities that manage to have better infrastructure and a more significant number of educational personnel are the ones that show the most critical linguistic displacement.

For example, the case of Santa María Ixcatlán (Oaxaca) is unique, as it is the community where the last speakers of the Ixcateca language live. The Ixcateca language is the language most at risk of disappearing from the state of Oaxaca. Still, it is a community with an educational infrastructure that does not belong to the indigenous education system but has been recognised by different governmental institutions because the students have won general knowledge competitions at the regional level. The community is also organised in education committees to be aware of all the needs in the three school levels (pre-school, primary and secondary). However, although parents allow their children to learn

words in the Ixcatecan language, the revitalisation of Ixcatecan is not part of their educational or community projects (Sumano & Mendoza, 2021).

In this context, during the isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents began to demand that teachers, who do not live in the community and are not Ixcatec speakers, reactivate face-to-face classes from the beginning of 2021 when in urban areas and some indigenous communities, contagions were high. However, because the federal indications were not yet to return to face-to-face classes in Ixcatlan, they were not resumed until the end of 2021, and then only gradually.

In Santa María Ixcatlán, education and the teaching staff have had an essential presence in the community. Many civic and festive activities are organised based on the school dynamics. In addition, with the cancellation of face-to-face classes, some indigenous students do not benefit from the government programme *Full-time schools* (Escuelas de Tiempo completo) and *Communal kitchens* (Cocinas comunitarias). These initiatives provide breakfast and lunch offered in the *Full-time schools'* programme. These feeding processes allow many children to supplement their diet, which is often in short supply at home. Therefore, for some students and their families, this situation of isolation affected the feeding process (Córdova-Hernández, 2020).

Although initiatives favouring the Ixcatecan language have been developed for several decades, unfortunately, the type of education grew in general. It has no cultural relevance whatsoever, and, through the models and themes of the curriculum, the recognition of language and culture is to a certain extent, a folkloric issue rather than an ethnolinguistic reclamation.

The situation is different in the state of Chiapas, specifically in the Chuj-speaking indigenous communities located on the Mexico-Guatemala border (Córdova-Hernández, 2022). For example, in one of the Chuj communities (Nuevo Porvenir), since the summer of 2019, the students of one of the two multi-grade groups of the primary school attached to indigenous education had no teacher since the previous year. One of the teachers had completed his years of decent service to retire. However, the state education authorities had not assigned the new teacher, and the students had no classes. The situation began to be regularised at the end of 2019 and 2020.

It is essential to mention that the Chuj communities in Mexico, except for three, are 30 years old. Most of their adult and elderly inhabitants are of Guatemalan origin who became naturalised Mexicans in the 1990s. Their naturalisation took place a decade after they fled Guatemala in 1980 due to the internal war and the indigenous genocide perpetrated in that country. Despite their naturalisation and the Mexican citizenship by the birth of the Chuj population in Mexico, they continue to live in conditions of discrimination and racism by mestizo and non-Chuj indigenous societies of Mexican origin.

As a result, few Mexican Chuj youths (under the age of 30) have begun to become professionals, so there are no teachers of Chuj origin in the state of Chiapas who can attend to the children of Chuj communities. Also, since most of the indigenous teachers are from other regions, they do not want to work in the border communities, and, if they do, they look for ways to change their job assignments as soon as possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools. The children of the Nuevo Porvenir community did not have a teacher for a year. Due to the conditions in the infrastructure of the communities, government remedial programmes were not used, and it was decided that the teachers would go to the

communities and leave tasks that the children, together with the parents, would develop. However, during the summer of 2021, we observed that the children did not do their homework in several communities. On the contrary, they were dedicated to strengthening their skills in agriculture, transporting firewood for domestic use, storing corn, etc. The children would learn these activities throughout their development. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were not in the classroom. But they have now observed or learned about it through their interaction with parents.

On one side, in linguistic terms, the community kitchens were a space for socialisation in the indigenous language where they could directly reproduce efforts favouring the language. However, these spaces have been closed. On the other side, in favourable terms, if the school is not a vehicle for teaching, students return to their homes. As a result, they resumed activities that they usually do not do because they attend farming or other activities to support the family. However, this return has been slow and hybrid for both indigenous communities and urban schools in Chiapas and Oaxaca since January 2022. Hence, it is unclear how it will impact the teaching and learning process.

## 5 Conclusions

The re-establishment of returning to school is uncertain. It will depend on the working conditions with which teachers return to the communities they serve — also, the teachers' number who return to the classroom. For example, some teachers were reassigned to another district or, sadly, died from COVID-19. Although, in this way, simply the return to face-to-face classes has been different from other years, many indigenous education teachers are still training in the use of technology for teaching.

In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic is just one issue to show that educational injustices towards indigenous peoples did not start with the pandemic but are historical and structural. In Chiapas and Oaxaca, thanks to the fact that many indigenous communities are located far from large cities, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a high mortality rate. However, in the case of indigenous groups living in cities, the pandemic substantially impacted the number of infections and deaths. As a result, it will soon lead to a drastic change in the number of indigenous language speakers census. However, in the case of Oaxaca, languages such as Ixcatec, which are at high risk of disappearing, did not have a considerable death rate due to COVID-19. Therefore, in the case of languages such as Chuj, the pandemic has not significantly impacted their vitality.

Therefore, we can conclude that formal education is fundamental for the indigenous population to have equity and social justice conditions. However, Mexican indigenous languages and cultures were in danger of displacement in the school context even before the pandemic. The school continues to be a social and cultural exclusion for students of indigenous origin. Perhaps, social isolation and close exchange between students and their families could be a hopeful way to improve local linguistic and cultural knowledge transmission. But this issue ought to be part of future research.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, *6*(1), 7–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587

Ameglio, P., Amor, G., & Mendiola, V. (2018). Conflicto magisterial en México por la abrogación de la Reforma Educativa. Un avance exploratorio de las acciones de lucha social [Teachers' conflict in Mexico for the abrogation of the Education Reform. An exploratory advance of the social struggle actions]. *Revista de Cultura de paz*, 2, 215–238. https://www.revistadeculturadepaz.com/index.php/culturapaz/article/view/20

Avineri, N., Graham, L. R., Johnson, E. J., Riner, R. C., & Rosa, J. (2019). Introduction: Reimagining language and social justice. In N. Avineri, L. R. Graham, E. J. Johnson, R. C. Riner, & J. Rosa (Eds.), *Language and social justice in practice* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.

Baynes, K. (2019). Social equality, social freedom and democracy. *Constellations*, *26*(3), 442–450. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12435

Brenzinger, M., & de Graaf, T. (2006). Documenting endangered languages and maintaining language diversity. In A. Sujoldzic (Ed.), *Linguistic anthropology. encyclopedia of life support systems* (pp. 238–262). EOLSS Publishers-UNESCO.

Burkemper, E. M., & Stretch, J. J. (2013). The right of justice: Contributions of social work practice-research. In J. J. Stretch, E. M. Burkemper, & W. J. Hutchison (Eds.), *Practicing social justice* (pp. 1–6). Routledge.

Caminero-Santangelo, M. (2020). Bridge essay: From human rights to social justice: Literature and the struggle for a better world. *A Companion to world literature*, (pp. 1–6). Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0284

Carlisle, L. R., Jackson, B. W., & George, A. (2006). Principles of social justice education: The social justice education in schools project. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *39*(1), 55–64.

Clément, D. (2018). Human rights or social justice? The problem of rights inflation. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *22*(2), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1349245

Consejo Nacional de Evaluacion de la Politica de Desarrollo Social. (2021, September 27). *El Coneval presenta la evaluación inicial de la estrategia Aprende en casa 2021*. [Coneval presents the initial evaluation of the Aprende en Casa 2020 program] https://www.coneval.org.mx/SalaPrensa/Comunicadosprensa/Documents/2021/COMUNICADO_12_EVALUACION_INICIAL_APRENDE_EN_CASA_2021.pdf

Córdova-Hernández, L. (2020). Conflicto lingüístico y educación para la paz en comunidades indígenas del sur de México [Linguistic conflict and peace education in indigenous communities in Southern Mexico]. *Eirene Estudios de Paz y Conflictos*, 3(4), 37–52. https://estudiosdepazyconflictos.com/index.php/eirene/article/view/85

Córdova-Hernández, L. (2022). Vitalidad y desplazamiento de la lengua chuj una década después [Vitality and displacement of the Chuj language a decade later]. In N. Martínez & A. C. Hecht (Eds.) *Educar en la diversidad #7: la diversidad lingüística de América Latina a la luz del Decenio Internacional sobre las Lenguas Indígenas: 2022-2032* (pp. 14–21). Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales. https://www.clacso.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/V1_Educar-en-la-diversidad_N7.pdf

De León, L. (2016). Indigenous language policy and education in Mexico. In T. McCarty & S. May (Eds.). *Language policy and political issues in education. Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 415–433). Springer.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2019). Bringing race into second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, *103*, 145–151. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12523

Francis, D., & le Roux, A. (2011). Teaching for social justice education: The intersection between identity, critical agency, and social justice education. *South African Journal of Education*, *31*(3), 299–311. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v31n3a533

Grant, C. A., & Gibson, M. L. (2013). "The path of social justice": A human rights history of social justice education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *46*(1), 81–99.

Gómez, D. M., & Martínez Domínguez, M. (2020). Brechas digitales indígenas en tiempos de Covid-19 [Indigenous digital gaps in Times of Covid-19]. *Ichan Tecolotl*. CIESAS. https://ichan.ciesas.edu.mx/brechas-digitales-indigenas-en-tiempos-de-Covid-19-2/

Hamel, R. E. (2016). Bilingual education for indigenous peoples in Mexico. In J. Cummins, J. & N. Hornberger, N. (Eds.). *Bilingual and multilingual education* (pp. 396–406). Springer.

Korsbaek, L., & Sámano-Rentería, M. Á. (2007). El indigenismo en México: antecedentes y actualidad [Indigenism in Mexico: Background and current affairs]. *Ra Ximhai, 3*(1), 195–224. https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=46130109

Ling, T., & Nasri, N. M. (2019). A Systematic review: Issues on equity in education. *Creative Education*, *10*, 3163–3174. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2019.1012240

Moreno, M. G., & Saldívar, E. (2016). 'We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans': Privilege, nationalism and post-race ideology in Mexico. *Critical Sociology*, *42*(4-5), 515–533. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920515591296

National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (2018). *Panorama educativo de la población indígena y afrodescendiente 2017* [Educational overview of the indigenous and afro-descendant population 2017]. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/mexico/media/936/file/PEPIA_2017.pdf

Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Rawls, J. (1971). *Theory of justice.* Harvard University Press.

Sartorello, S. (2019). *La agenda pendiente de la educación intercultural bilingüe en México* [The pending agenda for intercultural bilingual education in Mexico]. Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa.

Saveedra, E., & Quilaqueo, D. (2021). Desafío epistemológico de los conocimientos educativos indígena y escolar para una educación intercultural [Epistemological challenges of indigenous educational knowledge and schooling for intercultural education]. *Educaçao e Pesquisa: Revista da Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo*, 47(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202147231832

Secretaría de Educación Pública. (2020, March 14). *Comunicado conjunto No. 3. Presentan Salud y SEP medidas de prevención para el sector educativo nacional por COVID-19)* [Joint announcement No. 3. Health Department and SEP present prevention measures for the national education sector (by COVID-19)]. https://www.gob.mx/sep/es/articulos/comunicado-conjunto-no-3-presentan-salud-y-sep-medidas-de-prevencion-para-el-sector-educativo-nacional-por-covid-19?idiom=es

Secretaría de Educación Pública. (2021, August). *Aprende en casa: recursos para el aprendizaje en la modalidad mixta* [Learn at home: Resources for blended learning]. https://educacionbasica.sep.gob.mx/multimedia/RSC/BASICA/Documento/202108/202108-RSC-Aprende%20en%20casa.pdf

Sen, A. K. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Harvard University Press.

Schmelkes, S., & Aguila, G. (2019). *La educación multigrado en México* [Multi-grade Education in Mexico]*.*  Instituto Nacional para la Evalución de la Educación.

Schmelkes, S. & Ballesteros, A.D. (2022). Intercultural education: The training of teachers for Inclusion. In I. Menter, I. (Ed.) The Palgrave handbook of teacher education research (pp. 1–24). Palgrave Macmillan.

Sonnleitner, W. (2020). Participation, representation and political inclusion. Is there an indigenous vote in Mexico? *Política y Gobierno*, *27*(2), 1–39. http://www.scielo.org. mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-20372020000200009&lng=es&tlng=en

Sumano, I., & Mendoza, A. (2021). Experiencias etnográficas en torno a la lengua ixcateca [Ethnographic experiences with the Ixcatec language]. In L. Córdova-Hernández, & J. Valtierra (Eds.) *Continnum investigativo y diversidad lingüístico-cultural del sur de México* [Research continuum and linguistic-cultural diversity in Southern Mexico]. (pp. 95–116). CONACYT, Juan Pablo Editores, UABJO, Universidad La Salle México.

Valtierra, J., & Córdova-Hernández, L. (2021). Pueblos indígenas y religiosidad en México frente a la pandemia por COVID-19 [Indigenous peoples and religion in Mexico in the context of the COVID-1 pandemic]. *Comparative Cultural Studies - European and Latin American Perspectives, 6*(13), 89–101. https://doi.org/10.36253/ccselap-12762

Venslauskaitė, G. I. (1999). Analysis of the main notions of J. Rawls'" a theory of justice". *Problemos*, *55*.

UNESCO (2020). *Pueblos indígenas y COVID-19: una mirada desde México* [Indigenous peoples and COVID-19: A perspective from Mexico]. https://es.unesco.org/news/ pueblos-indigenas-y-covid-19-mirada-mexico

UNICEF (2018). *Informe Anual. México 2018* [Annual report. Mexico 2018]. https://www. unicef.org/mexico/media/1781/file/Informe%20anual%202018.pdf