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# Maya Indigeneity in the Public School System: Institutional Barriers between Educators and Students

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the theoretical conclusions drawn from a larger study on the education of Guatemalan-Maya students in a North Georgia public school system. The purpose of the study is to understand how the public-school system shapes the attitudes and perceptions of public educators in the United States towards the education of their students, and how this system ultimately affects identity, acculturation, and academic achievement. The entire document, “‘We Run a Different School Within a School’: Educator Perceptions of Guatemala-Maya Students in a North Georgia Public School System” can be found at [https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast\\_etd/19/](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast_etd/19/).

## Introduction

The usual haste of the school year had subsided for the summer. Haley, who teaches English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), talked to me while shuffling through paperwork, in an otherwise empty classroom. She was describing a conversation between herself and a teacher earlier that day. Haley sighed, “I just heard a student get deported yesterday...I went to their teacher and I said “Well now he’s back in Guatemala”...and she said “Oh I thought he was from Mexico.”

Haley presented this account with obvious frustration. The seemingly benign comment from the teacher, who thought her Guatemalan student was Mexican, exposed and embodied a deeper and all too prevalent misunderstanding of ethnic identity composition of the Latino/a population within North Georgia, and largely, the United States. Although the student in question immigrated to the United States from Guatemala, the classroom teacher erroneously assumed his nationality was Mexican. This assumption about nationality and culture within an academic setting effectively caused cultural misinterpretation and ultimately, erasure.

Stephanie, an ESOL teacher, revealed another example of cultural misinterpretation between U.S.-born educators and Guatemalan-Maya students. On test days, the students attempted to share answers because they understood this as a communal act of helping

each other towards success. They were not acculturated in a mentality of individualized achievement. U.S.-born educators interpreted this action disapprovingly because they understood it as cheating. Stephanie explained the actions of the Guatemalan-Maya students to other educators while simultaneously stressing the importance of individual work to the students themselves. Even though the teachers were able to understand the actions of the Guatemalan-Maya students, it was ultimately the students who altered their behavior to accommodate the culture of the school system.

The conversations among teachers noted above demonstrates the effects of individual assumptions. Through the generalized dismissiveness of these students' identity, the teachers failed to notice significant needs separating them, as a Guatemalan-Maya, from other multilingual learners. In this way, the public-school system attempts to promote a monoculture environment. This systematic attempt at acculturation merely creates borders and forces students to compartmentalize their identity based on the spaces they inhabit.

Due to linguistic and cultural differences, Maya children require different resources from traditional Latino/a immigrants in order to succeed throughout the acculturation process in a Western, Anglo society. Understanding students outside of the school system is crucial for effective education. As Lisa Delpit argues, "If we do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside of the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths." (Delpit, 1995, p.173) As it relates to the Guatemala-Maya in North Georgia, educator perception of this indigenous cultural significantly influences academic achievement within the public-school system.

### **Background on North Georgia**

In order to understand the dynamic between educators and Guatemalan-Maya families and students, it is important to acknowledge the history of the Maya in North Georgia. In the previous decades (and into the present), the Southeastern United States experienced a drastic population shift as immigrant settlements increased. This shift was, and still is, met with resistance in many communities and political arenas, including the public-school system.

Rural North Georgia does not offer the supporting culture, population, or history represented in cities such as Miami or Los Angeles. The general lack of local knowledge about Latino/a culture was compounded by the relatively sudden community growth of Spanish speakers. This lack of cultural knowledge from locals, led to generalized categorizing of all Latino/a's with a specific set of cultural traits; including assumed

language, religion, and beliefs. The Maya, as an Amerindian (native American) group were even less understood by the local citizens of Georgia. Thus, ethnic generalization erased the traits that differentiated the indigenous Maya from the Hispanic, Spanish speaking Mexican population in North Georgia.

The erasure of Maya indigeneity stalled, if not prevented, the establishment of resources tailored to the needs of this population. These resources include everything from linguistic interpreters and cultural education to financial education and immigration lawyers. Today, a local university and several churches work closely with the Maya community in North Georgia to provide much needed resources and education to the outside population. These organizations try to mobilize the resources that the Guatemalan-Maya population require to promote life and wellbeing. Although progress seems visible, there is still a high demand for interpreters, education services, and community organization specific to the Maya people.

Guatemalan students present a particular set of needs. Many of these students are not native Spanish speakers, and their parents might have received little formal education. They are an indigenous population in Guatemala, but North Georgians generally see them under the label of “Hispanic”, causing their academic needs to go largely unmet in the Georgia schools. The purpose of this project was to understand attitudes and perceptions held by teachers related to the education of their Maya students. These attitudes and perceptions were analyzed within a broader sociocultural context.

## Project Methodology

Prior to conducting interviews, I met with a ‘teacher on special assignment’, in a position of administration, for the county. This educator provided me with specific names of teachers to contact for interviews. Since the ESOL administrator for the county selected the educators involved in this study, it is relevant to note their perspectives were not impartial; they were selected through purposeful sampling. These teachers were recommended because of their extensive academic involvement with the Guatemalan-Maya population in North Georgia.

The ethnicity, gender, and national identities of the educators must be recognized as they provide a lens through which they see the world. All educators interviewed for this study were women, which influenced the conversation topics taking place between them and their students. Many of these women, especially those that worked with high school-age Guatemalan-Maya students, referred to confidential conversations with female students; subjects not breached in a mixed-gender space. Their gender offered access to

guarded topics of discussion, which illuminated the perceptions of the educators towards the roles of young Maya women within their families. However, none of the participants mentioned comparable conversations with their male students. In this way, female students influenced their perspectives.

While I would argue that the personal ethnic identities of the participants influence their understandings of interactions involving Guatemalan-Maya students, they will not be specifically defined within this study. My discussion of their personal ethnicities is limited: a small portion of the educators interviewed identified as Latina, and a few had close personal connections to the Latino/a community. None were Guatemalan-Maya or had any personal connections (outside of their roles as educators) to the Guatemalan-Maya community. Five out of seven educators involved in this study were native English speakers. The remaining educators who participated in this study did not specifically identify their ethnic identity.

The teachers taught grade levels between all three major school stages: elementary, middle, and high school. Throughout the interviews, educators discussed how these grade levels largely shape the experiences conveyed through the interviews. For example, the high school educators discussed documentation status because it influences post-secondary opportunities. At the elementary level, documentation status did not appear as a topic of concern, perhaps because elementary-level Guatemalan-Maya students in ESOL classes are predominantly U.S. born citizens. Although the citizenship status of the parent does have an effect on the life of the student, from the perspective of the educator, these effects are not as discernible at a young age. Academic formats and expectations also differ between elementary, middle, and high schools. However, unlike content-based classes, ESOL courses maintain significant similarities throughout all three levels. Linguistic goals are generally the same regardless of age, and each level uses similar classroom structures. Major differences are found in the content of the general education curriculum and assumed skills/knowledge of students. I requested this balanced grade-level representation for the interviews (as far as it was possible) to understand the scope of interactions between the educators and their Guatemalan Maya students.

## Interpretation

To understand the positionality of the Guatemala-Maya in public education, we can look through the lens of critical multiculturalism. According to Marom, rather than promoting diversity based on 'celebratory' tactics, critical multiculturalism calls for a challenge to the power relations entrenched in Western societies, through the examination

of racism that exists beyond color. As discussed at the beginning of this piece, there are mechanisms of oppression that affect immigrants from Latin America, regardless of indigeneity. Colonial culture generalizes Maya with Latino/a by painting everyone with a broad 'brown' brush. In doing so, the continual colonization of indigenous peoples occurring in the Americas vanishes from the analysis of race and racism. (Marom, 2016, p.27)

In the broader scope of the United States society, the institution of public education is one of many spaces that replicate hegemonic norms. The foundational laws of public education are constructed through colonial understandings of inclusion, and therefore establish it as a tool to promote and continue the dominant culture. This foundation in colonialism and Western thought systematically prevents public education from supporting the indigenous cultural identity of the Guatemala-Maya.

Public education is not the only institution in the United States that reinforces or replicates hegemonic culture. However, education is a unique institution in this regard because it presents itself as accessible, beyond citizenship. Students without documentation are not barred from entering into the public education system. But there is a pervasive duality within public education for immigrant students: it is accessible but will never provide the accommodations to be deemed equitable.

The educators involved in this study frequently expressed the language, literacy, and general knowledge of their Guatemalan-Maya students and families in deficit form. Because they understand this group through the established lens of public education and Western norms, their culture appears unprogressive. This perception of deficiency is applied to the Maya as an indigenous group. It is compounded further when Guatemala-Maya people are blanketed with the label 'Latino/a' or 'Hispanic', as it correlates their culture to Hispanic Latin-America and consequently erases indigenous identity.

The educator interviews were analyzed for repeating subjects, phrases, and points of conversation, which developed into the themes discussed in the thesis. They include 'language and literacy'; 'Maya knowledge deficit'; 'barriers to education', 'technology as a barrier', and 'educator training, resources, and adaptations'. At different points throughout all of these themes, educators presented their ideas within the framework of deficit ideology. This ideology emphasizes the knowledge a student 'lacks', as defined by the expectations of the public school system. (Gorski, 2016, p.382)

Below are examples of educators speaking about students through deficit ideology.

They [parents] don't really have the knowledge of school and school procedures nor the tools to support their child's education meaning they

don't know how to check their grades, how to help them with homework, etc. (Helen)

We only send them [materials] in Spanish and it is not the first language for a lot of these families, it is not even something they can partially understand for some of these families. I mean, some of the families just say, you have to speak to my dad because my mom doesn't speak any Spanish... (Haley)

...because they don't have the support at home, parents can't read or write, they don't have any, maybe a 1st grade education...So what happens is, because the students don't have that background, our students are behind. They are behind because they don't have anybody helping them or that has the knowledge to help them with math or reading... (Francesca)

They have no written language...in the most advanced academic world there is a concept of the written form of Mam and Q'anjob'al but they don't have it. (Christina)

...no education, they don't know Spanish...they speak very broken Spanish. They can't read or write in any language. (Gracie)

There are broad implications for deficit language used by educators, particularly as it applies to linguisticism and indigeneity. To better understand these consequences, it should be established that this is not an implication of individual educator beliefs. The public-school system is a subset of hegemonic culture and as such, establishes a learning environment that replicates broader ruling class ideology. Educators are not immune from these influences, and this manifests in their observations and instruction. As Endo argues, unconscious understandings of culture, without critical exposure to the complex dynamics of language and power, results in "subjective assessments about linguistically diverse learners' academic performance that could ultimately perpetuate uneven academic opportunities and outcomes". (Endo, 2015, p.208-213) Without exposing teachers to the colonial relationship with indigeneity, these underlying notions remain unchallenged, even as they influence the perceived academic competency of Guatemalan-Maya students.

The unconscious understanding of culture, as described above, presents further difficulty as it is indistinguishable for many outside its oppression. Teachers described at length the accommodations made for their Maya students, along with their desire for

thoughtful and extensive training. Changing their schedule, restructuring the format of their program, and providing personal financial assistance were only a selection of actions discussed throughout the interviews. The steps they took to promote a conducive educational environment for their Guatemalan-Maya students connects to the laws that establish barriers to education. These laws are not relegated to student academic success. The educators have illustrated how sociopolitical and economic factors increase their personal responsibility, and individual actions, towards their students.

It is obvious the educators involved in this study cared deeply for the well-being and success of their students, but recognized the challenges to establishing an environment beneficial to their education. This recognition included self-reflection and systemic critique. All the educators involved in this study actively sought to create a functional academic experience for their Guatemala-Maya students.

It must be understood: the issue is not the educators, but rather the system and its role in the maintenance of hegemony. As a component of society at-large, the structures of oppression that exist within the public school have become a collective norm. The 'goals' and 'milestones' students demonstrate across different levels are presented as preparation for their future or measures of academic success. These milestones are understood as universal truths of academic success because they are easily observed within dominant culture. This assumption of universality, as it applies to United States society, subsequently eliminates critical analysis.

Much of the research related to multiculturalism in education engages the responsibility of the educator in fostering a diverse curriculum and environment. I want to emphasize that educators are not merely proponents of this system, but also exist under its oppression. Even as teachers, they still maintain individual identities that fall under the scrutiny of dominant culture. Supplementary training and resources will not completely resolve the barriers teachers listed, because educators are not autonomous from this hegemonic system of which education is a central part. They navigate a complicated space, particularly when confronted with bridging disparities between systemic expectations and the traits of their students. Rather, to completely understand the scope of this situation is to view teachers as participants in the same system, not culprits.

## Conclusion

The institution of public education serves to acculturate and socialize many students, not only the Guatemala-Maya. Any student raised outside of the dominant culture in the United States experiences some level of assimilation during their tenure as a public-school

student (as do all students). This institution begins imprinting values and methods of thought onto children at ages as young as four or five.

Through their indigenous and Latino/a identity, Guatemalan-Maya immigrants are forced to negotiate the United States, grounded in the implicit and explicit conceptions of dominant culture. These conceptions are marked by assumptions about indigeneity as an 'underdeveloped' culture, and Latino/a as 'foreign' or 'other'. The hegemonic concept of 'normal' stresses white, middle-class, English-speaking citizens as the measure of regularity. This measure of regularity compels Guatemalan-Maya identity, in its entirety, to be understood as an 'outsider' in the United States.

The effect of systemic acculturation can also be understood through subtractive bilingualism and the imposition of English-only education. (Portes and Smargorinsky, 2010, p.236) This method of learning attempts to prevent the student from speaking their native language within the space of the public school. A tangible border exists that causes students to understand the public school system as a space that only accepts hegemonic conceptions of 'normal'. Their native language and culture lacks recognition within this concept of normal, thus establishing their identity as 'other'. Subtractive bilingualism drives indigenous and Latino/a cultural identity outside of the learning environment, creating both physical and mental boundaries.

The existence of indigenous and Latino/a students in this educational system is demonstrative of transnationalism in the classroom. Their identities in this space establish cultural, legal, and linguistic borders that must be navigated daily. Regardless of cultural background and identity, educators are trapped within the borders of classrooms. They are the mediators between transnationalism and a system of colonization. Some may argue that educators implement these hegemonic methods of thought onto their students. I think, as shown by the educators involved in this study, they inhabit a complex space. It is overly simplistic to relegate their roles as the implementers of colonized culture. Educators exist within their own borders through the intersectionality of their personal identity, the identity of those they teach, and the foundations of public education. Many educators involved in this study altered the curriculum to accommodate the needs of their Guatemalan-Maya students, while simultaneously attempting to acculturate them into the United States. This was done largely for practicality and the students' ability to succeed in society. Educators did not inherently want to establish the public-school system as a space of hegemony, but without that acculturation, their students would most likely not be accepted into U.S. society.

To disrupt the current cycles of acculturation, it is important to influence laws and policies, and to encourage more research on K-12 education. For example, No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) continues to have enormous influence on the structure of public school curriculum and design. This law defines what and how many children learn, which inevitably integrates itself into their mentality. NCLB is congruent with subtractive bilingualism, taught in many ESOL classrooms throughout the nation. The overarching influence of these laws can be found in the history of the Americas, identity formation, and social structures. We must approach these policies and regulations as advocates, legal analysts, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, among many other roles. As advocates for equality in education, we must also develop spaces that promote the development and maintenance of heritage. Community spaces that encourage cultural and linguistic education allow people to cultivate their cultural identity, while simultaneously traversing societal systems. In the case of the Maya, schools generally ignore or remain unaware of indigenous languages, which further challenges the strength of Maya identity. Perhaps recognizing and helping maintain Maya languages would provide social capital to Maya students, thus strengthening their ability to maintain a culture that is otherwise marginalized.

The concepts and possible solutions mentioned here are merely a few examples of the many ways scholars and advocates can be more involved in the field of Education. The field of Education goes far beyond the discussions had in this study. Education is not relegated to identity formation but has some influence on almost every aspect of society. Education is also not limited to kindergarten through twelfth grade. Rather, education as an experience, takes place in all spaces, at all points of life. Teachers and schools deserve access to education on the intersectional identities and needs that students bring with them to the classroom. This intersectional understanding can apply to all students, not just the Guatemalan Maya, and allow teachers and schools to tailor their learning environments for more effective education.

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