# Unity and Diversity: High School Students' Perceptions on Multiculturalism and the Intercultural University of the State of Guerrero, Mexico

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**Abstract:** This is a mixed methods study conducted in Guerrero, Mexico, at the end of the academic year 2005-2006. The purpose of this study was to capture the perceptions held by high school students, of both indigenous and non-indigenous background, regarding the intercultural university, as well as their conceptualization of multiculturalism.

The indigenous population in Mexico has long struggled to be recognized inclusively in the nation, especially in the field of education. Nowadays, the public education system is transforming itself to address a multicultural Mexico in higher education. The gradual creation of intercultural universities exemplifies this transformation. One of these intercultural universities, the Intercultural University of the State of Guerrero, will be created in the state of Guerrero, forming part of the intercultural universities network. The university seeks to acknowledge the diverse voices of Mexico, and for students to gain an understanding of their culture and those of others (CNDPI, 2006). The modest but ambitious project of IUSG (and of the intercultural universities, in general), represents a landmark in the education system of the nation.

President Fox (2006) stated that the project sought to create "universities… of high quality for indigenous youth. In doing this, a debt that dates from long ago is being paid. This is a debt that the country has with the indigenous communities, this debt of forgetting… [and] discriminating…" (CNDPI, 2006). Taylor (1994) adequately frames Fox's words regarding the project in his theoretical discussion of politics of recognition. His guiding principles on interculturalism, and notions of unity and diversity, steered the research presented here. According to him, "The demand for recognition… is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity" (p. 25). He argues that "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or… by the *mis*recognition of others… Nonrecognition or misrecognition… can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a… distorted… mode of being" (p. 25). Cushner (1998), Giles (1947), and Banks (1981, 1996, 2004) also provide guiding principles for educators and for implementing education, as noted in the discussion.

The purpose of the study was to explore and capture high school students' perceptions, of both indigenous and non-indigenous background, regarding the intercultural institution, and their conceptualization of multiculturalism. The study was conducted in five locations in Guerrero (in 2006), in eight public high schools. The instrument used to explore their perceptions was a questionnaire of 15 items, including open-ended questions. Students' responses provided insight on their attitudes toward national unity and diversity, specifically the open-ended questions. The responses of the Likert scale-only items will be presented as percentages for discussion purposes, but a more in-depth discussion of these will be considered during future research endeavors.

## Method

This is a mixed-methods research study that sought to explore high school students' perceptions using a questionnaire. Out of the fifteen items in the questionnaire, twelve statements had a Likert scale format only, one had both a Likert scale and an open-ended section (item #12)

and two were open-ended (#14 and #15). The author personally visited each of the schools, and distributed the questionnaire to participants, ages 18 to 23. Using SPSS and Excel, the author obtained descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests, searched for repeated words/ideas, grouped these in categories, and turned them into percentages.

*Categories*

Item #12 stated, "If everybody in Mexico were from the same culture or spoke the same language, we would be united. Yes/No, and Why?" Items #14 and #15 dealt with the students' tentative enrollment in the intercultural university. After a description of the project, they were asked (#14), "If this institution were to be established, would you like to enroll? Yes/No, and Why?" Question #15 asked, "Would you feel more part or less part of Mexico if you attended this school? More/Less, and Why?" These open-ended responses were placed in categories. The responses of #15 were combined with #14 in the categories.

*The Sample*

The questionnaire was distributed in eight public high schools to students 18 to 23 years of age. High schools #1, 9, and 33 are located in the city of Chilpancingo, and #7 and 27 are in Acapulco. School #11 is in the city of Tlapa, #26 in Chilapa, and #29 in Tixtla. For the purpose of this study, an urban high school will be that in a large city in which the percentage of indigenous language speakers is small, and rural/semi rural is a school in a smaller location, less populated, and in which the percentage of indigenous language speakers is larger than in the urban. For example, in Tlapa, 56.1% of the population speaks an indigenous language (INEGI, 2006).

*Limitations of the Study*

Out of the eight high schools, the observed questionnaires of four did not match or surpass the number of expected questionnaires, according to the Chi-Square tests. An additional 128 participants would have met the requirements for the study to be representative.

## Results

The findings of the study revealed that although only a small percentage (17.33%) of students considered the project as a means to fight for ethnic and cultural representation, their responses highlighted the rationale for the creation of the IUSG and the urgency for recognition. In general, the students' answers to question # 14 (see Method section) were to preserve dialects/cultures, to highlight cultural diversity, and to foster respect and tolerance. They also mentioned being proud of one's origins, and to learn how to interact better with people different from you. Participants also said they will enroll in the IUSG to counteract cultural imperialism, racism or "homogenization," and to give indigenous communities larger representation in society. In the case of indigenous students, frequent answers were to practice and strengthen their dialect, learn it better and teach it to others, and to develop skills to serve a community.

## Discussion

Taylor (1994) argued that "the demand for equal recognition extends beyond acknowledging equal value of all humans potentially, and comes to include the equal value of what [cultures] have made of this potential" (p. 42). The concept of potentiality highlights culture as not only a present value, but suggests the long-term vision of the culture's contribution as a whole. It denotes a procedural inclusiveness that considers multiple, positive reasons for appreciation and integration. The IUSG represents more than just institutional recognition of multicultural students. It also addresses notions of equality, respect, the issues of "nonrecognition" or "misrecognition" of the Mexican society towards ethnic minorities, something that Taylor (1994) denounced as harmful and oppressive. Similarly, the university

gives students the opportunity to develop an understanding of their own identities, their contributions in their communities and their nation. The students will be able to discover their originality as individuals through a rich process of interpersonal relations. For instance, in expressing his views regarding enrollment, a student of Náhuatl descent stated, "We would have interconnections of diverse cultures… [and] This [school] will… help us to know ourselves better as Mexican indigenous people" (Male, urban high school, strongly agrees to identify himself as indigenous).

*Intercultural Education, Identity and Unity*

One participant pointed out that "Being Mexican is something to be proud of, but there are some people that instead of highlighting this, they feel embarrassed about it" (Female, rural/semi rural high school, strongly agrees to identify herself as indigenous). Her schoolmate comments that "many are ashamed of their roots and this should not be; but the opposite, we have to show the greatness of our Mexico" (Male, rural/semi rural high school, strongly disagrees to identify himself as indigenous).

Responses such as these suggest that projects like the IUSG will foster identity construction through dialogue and interaction. In Taylor's (1994) words, our "own identity crucially depends on [our] dialogical relations with others" (p. 34). Interpreted in other words, we will know ourselves as we have meaningful, personal encounters or discussions ("dialogical relations") with others. Vázquez (1994) provides a transition between these dialogical relations that conduce to identity development and the notion of unity. He argues that a "… fundamental assumption [of]… intercultural action… is the one of *identity*," that, according to him, "organizes the individual and collective life… [and] Identity provides unity" (p. 34).

Likewise, the responses seem to indicate that there might be more than a transition towards recognition taking place, but also a discovery of our "strength in diversity" (Banks, 1981, p. 266). For example, one of the students expressed, "I believe that it is necessary to know more about our own culture and this will help us respond to the bad conceptualizations we have about indigenous people" (male, urban high school, neutral about identifying himself as indigenous). This participant's comment suggests that knowing oneself better invites others to view you differently, and challenges misconceptions regarding other people. A Tlapaneco student, who expressed an interest in enrollment at the university, elaborated on the concepts of restoration and maintenance of identity. He/she would like to attend IUSG so as "to not lose a culture like mine: Tlapaneca…" and added that "Mexico is… [composed of] indigenous communities and they should be respected."

*Unity and Diversity, or Just Unity, and No Diversity?*

Banks (1981) encourages educators to "explore ethnic pluralism in positive, realistic ways [to] … help students to understand that there is strength in diversity, and that social cooperation among ethnic groups is not… having identical beliefs, behaviors, and values" (p. 266). In other words, students need educational opportunities to understand that one can be different and united at the same time. Taylor argues the same, using the idea of politics of equal dignity and politics of difference in his writings on urgency for recognition. Oftentimes, these two conflict with each other. One emerges from the other, but they also diverge (Taylor, 1994). The politics of equal dignity deals with the universal notion that we are all the same in terms of rights (dignity). On the other hand, the politics of difference is a call "to recognize… the unique identity of [an] individual or a group, their distinctness from everyone else" (Taylor, 1994, p. 38). This kind of politics counteracts cultural homogenization; it seeks to highlight our uniqueness.

IUSG may represent the opportunity to explore ethnic pluralism, unity and diversity, opening a forum for the politics of equal dignity and difference to take place. For instance, in response to item #12 (see Method section), several students make reference to the strength found within cultural diversity. In summary, students believed that cultural diversity is more relevant or important than having just one language, their main arguments being that each culture has something to contribute, no matter the race, color, or language. Many agreed that heterogeneity must exist to have social diversity, and that differences make Mexico richer. In a very powerful statement, one of the students said, "If we all had the same language and the same culture, Mexico's cultural diversity will simply fade away."

Not all students, however, considered IUSG as an opportunity to explore cultural pluralism. Their responses could be interpreted as voicing the conflict between equal dignity and difference. A high percentage of participants revealed a pattern of highlighting unity by overlooking diversity. They used phrases that expressed their concern with inequalities (i.e., "to end racism," "to increase understanding"), while articulating at the same time what in Taylor's (1994) words, represents "difference-blindness." As stated before, many responses on item #12 dealt with unity as cultural homogenization. A large percentage of students made reference to unity stemming from "understanding" each other better linguistically, ideologically, and culturally. Others said that there would be "more" or "better" communication among us if we were from the same culture or spoke the same language. Others even said that disagreements would not exist because there would be a sharing of similar ideas, knowledge, opinion, language, and even problems, allowing also for better decision-making.

Surprisingly, many students outwardly expressed that having the same culture will put an end to racism or discrimination. However, although the students seemed, on paper, to highlight the positives, they may have inadvertently overlooked the negative effects (socially and culturally speaking) of cultural assimilation of homogenization. Students' responses suggest that they are being taught to passively accept assimilation of minority groups. Internalizing this, they conclude that linguistic and even cultural differences represent obstacles to "good" communication, progress, or even national unity. A student voiced her concern about the possible uncritical acceptance of assimilation: "[IUSG] will allow all students from ethnic groups to be accepted [to be enrolled]…" and she expressed that she would feel more part of Mexico because "As a student, I would be able to speak my dialect without anybody telling me not to" (urban high school, Mixteco descent, identifies as indigenous). Another student, remaining neutral about his indigenous identification, wrote that he would enroll in the IUSG "because all communities will have the opportunity to propose their ideas and of being heard; because right now they are not being heard…" (male, rural/semi rural high school).

As mentioned earlier, intercultural education "strives to eliminate prejudice and racism by creating an awareness of the diversity [and] … thus a rejection of absolute ethnocentrism" (Cushner, 1998, p. 2).  The key herein, and in contrast to some of the students' beliefs, is that eliminating prejudice and racism does not occur through cultural assimilation, but namely through the celebration of differences. Giles' (1947) contributing definition adds a powerful note about democracy: Intercultural education "posits the goal of democracy, understood as a process of furthering the maximum growth for *all*" (p. 13). He believes that intercultural education serves as a catalyst for democracy, assuming that all people will take part in it. He also highlights that unity occurs when interculturalism is acknowledged, and mutual understanding is fostered. This contradicts some of the rather inexperienced solutions provided by the students. They answered that we will "understand each other better," if the same culture existed (culturally

homogeneity)." However, Cushner and Giles suggest that understanding comes from knowing ourselves as unique individuals within a democratic context, where cultural diversity awareness arises. Banks (1981) surmises both Cushner's and Giles' definitions as he states that schools should assist students in developing insight into "their ethnic group identifications," forging connections among ethnicities, and recognizing "implications of their ethnic group identifications …" (Banks, 1981, p. 215).

Banks creates a scenario where neither ethnic minority students nor ethnic majority students are forced to turn into something they are not. For instance, 97% of the students strongly agreed/agreed to identify themselves as Mexicans, and 94.8% strongly agreed/agreed to feel part of Mexico. These percentages can be labeled as the students' "identification with the [majority] ethic group" (Banks, 1981, p. 215). On the other hand, 77.67% responded they would actually feel more part of Mexico by enrolling in IUSG. In projects like IUSG, differences are not only respected, but celebrated, and national identities will not be put in conflict with ethnic, individual, or community identities. Here is where the power of unity and diversity emerges.

*The Rationale for the Intercultural University (IUSG)*

For a long time, the education system failed to address differences amongst its students. As a result, they have not had the opportunity to experience the implementation of intercultural practices or curricula at school. Some responses suggest that the educational practices of the mainstream educational system (of homogeneity) may have resulted in learned attitudes of rejection. For this reason, students given the option to attend an intercultural institution picture it as "useless." A comment of this nature was: "Honestly, I wouldn't like to learn dialects, but rather a language like English or French, which are more useful" (Female, urban high school, disagreed to identify herself as indigenous).

On the other hand, many expressed that this university will be of much "use," in the sense that they will grow in awareness of Mexico's roots, interact with different cultures, and be sensitive towards minorities. A Náhuatl descent student expressed, "I would like to interact with people that have another way of thinking" and "I would create relationships with people of different traditions and I would learn from them" (female, urban high school, identifies herself as indigenous). Another student would like to enroll in the IUSG to not lose his Tlapaneca culture, and added that, "Mexico is also [composed of] indigenous communities and they should be respected and saved from foreign languages." (urban high school, identifies herself as indigenous). Comments as the following also reflect these young people's desire to keep their culture alive (in the case of indigenous students), and to learn about each other's culture. For example, a Mixteco descent student said, "[Attending an intercultural university] will encourage my dialect not to go extinct [to disappear]" (Mixteco descent, urban high school, strongly agrees to identify himself as indigenous). A non-indigenous student expressed her desire to learn an indigenous language, saying: "I don't speak any dialect and I would like to learn one [to]… understand… my friends" because "their dialects are what makes Mexico to be recognized, and makes us proud…" (rural/semi rural high school, strongly disagrees to identify herself as indigenous).

Some students, as expressed earlier, do not consider indigenous culture, knowledge or language of much "use." However, initiatives like the IUSG will encourage recognition and understanding as well as embrace the argumentations for intercultural education. Banks (2004) invites educators to engage in pedagogical initiatives that foster multiculturalism, through which students develop their identity and establish stronger connections with their cultural communities. In summary, one student's comment highlights the rationale of having IUSG; he/she would like to enroll "to know about Prehispanic cultures and in this way, create a synergy

between the modern and the historical so they prevail over time, cultures and languages that are almost extinct." He also said, "I will know how our ancestors lived… and it would fill the empty void that many people [have] for not knowing their culture but that now could be the right moment." (urban high school, disagrees to identify as indigenous).

Projects like IUSG might open opportunities for students to develop skills to function in a multicultural, democratic, and more just society. IUSG will allow for recognition of minorities in a Mexican context. The success of a project like the IUSG may not be determined quantitatively (i.e., massive enrollment). As this study showed, only a small percentage of students considered IUSG a relevant forum for diversity to flourish. A larger number of participants considered it more a language center or regular institution, and yet others did not consider it as an option for higher education. However, the recommendation for further planning on projects like the IUSG is to consider striving for quality, not necessarily quantity. Since these kinds of institutions are pioneering an unexplored educational alternative, the intercultural university finds strength in students who view it as a tool for cultural representation and exchange. Hopefully, the IUSG will foster the value of differences within the nation's reality, as well as equal dignity. For without any of these, we would miss the opportunity to have unity and diversity in Mexico.

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