



The indigenous achievement gap in Mexico: The role of teacher policy under intercultural bilingual education[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of Mexico's indigenous students attend intercultural bilingual education (IBE) schools. They consistently underperform relative to their non-indigenous peers. The paper uses new data from the state of Chiapas to estimate the determinants of the achievement gap. Results from regression analysis with and without school fixed effects find weak evidence to suggest that IBE is associated with higher test scores in Mathematics for indigenous students when the model is implemented as intended. A descriptive analysis of the data finds that a large proportion of IBE schools in Mexico do not deliver a "fully-implemented" model where teachers are indigenous and speak the same language as their students. Further, results from the national competition for new teaching posts suggests that the supply of new, qualified IBE teachers is small. Taken together these results highlight the difficulties of IBE in Mexico to recruit qualified teachers who meet language requirements. IBE has many virtues and could have the potential to narrow the achievement gap. However, if policymakers do not make substantial efforts to develop a suitable teacher pipeline to staff IBE schools, the model's potential will be limited.

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1. Introduction

Mexico has the largest indigenous population in Latin America and one of the highest levels of linguistic diversity in the world. Over 11 million people there speak more than 77 indigenous languages¹. Despite a long history of exclusion and low social

mobility, indigenous people in Mexico and elsewhere in the region have more years of schooling now than ever before (Hall and Patrinos, 2005). According to Mexican census data, in 1990 just about 80% of indigenous children aged 5–14 were enrolled in school; that figure is now well over 90%. During this time period, the gap in secondary school enrollment also decreased. The gap between indigenous and non-indigenous youth aged 12–29 with complete lower secondary school (middle school) dropped from nine percentage-points in 1990 to only two percentage-points in 2010.

These advances may be due in part to increased availability of Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE). Under IBE, indigenous students are assumed to be taught in their mother tongue from Kindergarten through 3rd grade, gradually making a full transition into Spanish by the 6th grade. Evidence from the United States and other developed nations suggests that bilingual education models provide significant benefits in test scores and other learning outcomes for linguistic minority children (Slavin and Cheung, 2005; Goldbenberg, 2008; Slavin et al., 2011; Baker, 1998; Cummins, 1999; RAND-PPS-ACIE, 2015). Prior research has shown that increased availability of indigenous IBE schools in the late 1990s prompted many indigenous parents to send their children to school (Parker et al., 2002, 2005).

This significant progress on the schooling front, however, was accompanied only by modest improvements in student learning

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¹ I use the traditional classification of indigenous peoples as those who speak an indigenous language. indigenous population sizes in Latin America range from 4% in Chile to 32% in Peru, 62% in Bolivia and 41% in Guatemala. In Mexico it is 7%. Some scholars and government agencies use the "self-identifying as indigenous" definition. Under this classification, over 18 million people in Mexico are indigenous (Coneval, 2014).

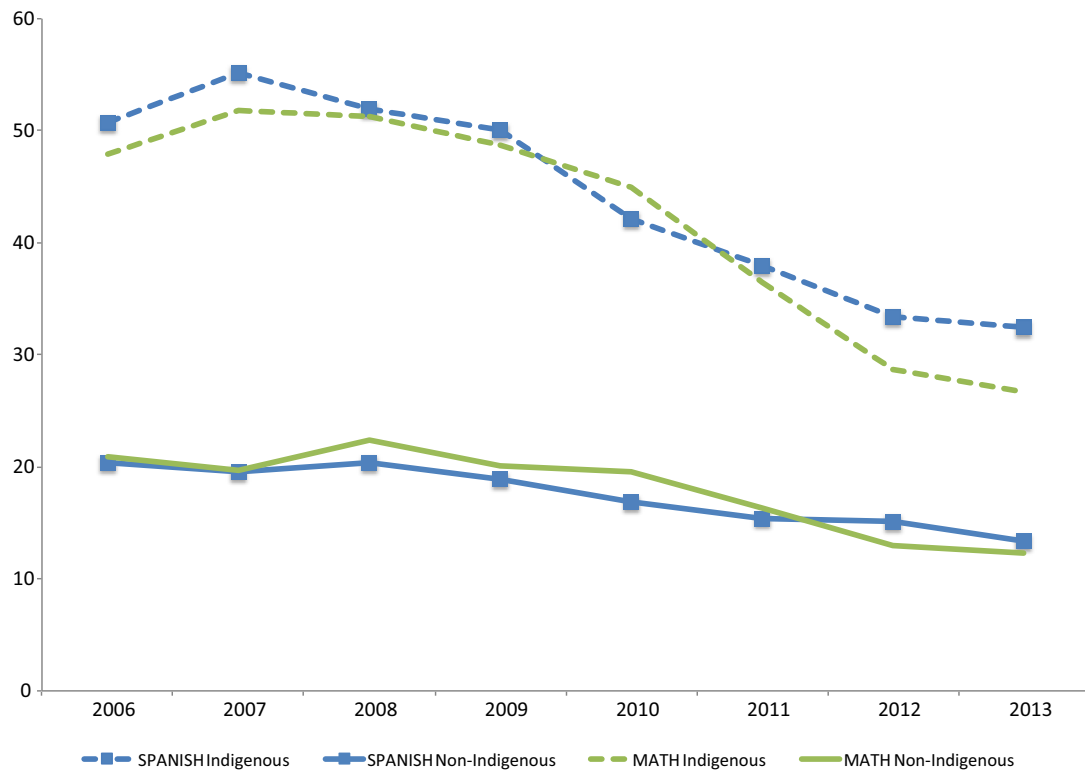


Fig. 1. Historical test score trends % achieving insufficient in Spanish Language Arts and Mathematics by Indigenous Status. *Source:* Own elaboration with ENLACE results. Available at: www.sep.gob.mx.

outcomes, high school completion, and college-going rates. The achievement gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students has declined since Mexico first began testing all students in 2006, but it remains significant (see Fig. 1). Between 2006 and 2013, for every non-indigenous elementary school student at the insufficient (non proficient) level in Spanish, there were 2.5 indigenous students at this same level. In Math the ratio was 1 to 2.3.

Issues with low academic proficiency along with inadequate access to high schools in rural areas have plagued indigenous educational attainment beyond middle school. According to the 2010 Mexican Census, only 14% of young indigenous students (aged 20–29) have completed high school relative to 25% of non-indigenous youths in this age group. Higher education enrollment rates are dismal: only 3% of indigenous youth attend institutions of higher education, as compared to 15% of the population as a whole (ages 12–29). For most indigenous youth, access to a college degree, the most important engine for social mobility in Mexico, remains a distant dream (CEEY, 2013; Carnoy et al., 2002).

Why have indigenous children failed to capitalize on the gains made by increased school access? One explanation is that indigenous children go to school and stay there longer, but fail to learn as much as their non-indigenous peers.

One obvious reason for this is poverty. However, even within similar levels of socio-economic status indigenous children underperform compared to non-indigenous children (Treviño Villarreal, 2007). A second explanation is related to the composition of the indigenous student enrollment. Since the late 1990s Mexico's main poverty alleviation strategy has been to grant low-income children with conditional cash transfers. These programs have been successful at keeping low-income children in school, and increasing the school enrollment for indigenous children (Levy and Schady, 2013; Parker et al., 2002, 2005). These children were likely to be out of school for reasons that are negatively correlated

with school learning outcomes. Their new enrollment status could contribute to a persistent achievement gap.

Much of the improvement in school going rates, however, happened between 1990 and 2000, when the out-of-school rate dropped from 33% to 19% for children ages 5–14 (those in primary and lower secondary age). Out-of-school rates continued to improve in subsequent years, but after 2005 the improvement has been marginal. Rates dropped only 1 percentage point to 11% in 2010. Thus, increased enrollment of formerly out-of-school children is unlikely to have been the main driver of persistent elementary school achievement gaps throughout the 2000s.

A third reason has to do with teachers and schools. Indigenous students' lower achievement could be the result of cumulative exposure to less qualified teachers and lower-resourced schools. In general, indigenous schools have lower instructional resources (i.e. textbooks) than regular schools and conditions that students describe as "bad" (Hernandez-Zavala et al., 2006). Teachers in indigenous schools also have lower qualifications both in terms of highest degree earned and seniority (Hernandez-Zavala et al., 2006).

In his study of Mexico's indigenous students, Treviño Villarreal (2007) argues that most of the variation in achievement can be explained by teacher factors. In particular he finds that indigenous children attend schools with lower "teacher quality" measured by student reports of teachers' attendance, attitudes toward them, and clarity of explanations. This student-reported index of teacher quality helps explain most of the variation in achievement between indigenous and non-indigenous rural student in his sample of three Mexican states. Other evidence from qualitative case studies of indigenous schools in Mexico suggest that indigenous teachers do not appear to be strong readers and writers themselves in either Spanish or their indigenous language (Viveros-Márquez and Moreno-Olivos, 2014; Garcia and Velasco, 2012). Although several authors have put forth empirical evidence

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