

# Pedagogical Mentorship as an In-Service Training Resource: Perspectives From Teachers in Guatemalan Rural and Indigenous Schools

Katy de la Garza

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

## Abstract

This study analyzed challenges faced by teachers in rural and Indigenous schools, and the impact of pedagogical mentorship in contributing towards more culturally and linguistically relevant education. Using a case from Guatemala, this article explored pedagogical mentorship as an in-service teacher training resource for multi-lingual and multi-cultural rural realities. The data was drawn from a qualitative and multisite research study based on participant observation and in-depth interviews. Results demonstrated that main challenges included economic hardships, malnutrition, absence or delays in basic government social programs, and superficial teacher training in bilingual intercultural education (EBI). Teachers perceived pedagogical mentors as *help* and *support* inside their classrooms, where they learned from and collaborated with mentors to strengthen their pedagogical skills, primarily in subjects related to language and communication. Mentor visits were scarce and short due to mentorship program designs that failed to consider in their budgets, recruiting practices and curriculum contents; and the travel distances and rural school community languages and cultures. However, findings showed that even with program shortcomings there was a wide acceptance of pedagogical mentorship by all teachers particularly for professional development in bilingual and intercultural education. Results suggest that pedagogical mentorship offers an opportunity to enforce the long overdue right for rural and Indigenous peoples to quality and culturally relevant education.

## Key Words

Bilingual intercultural education, mentorship, rural education, Indigenous language education, multi-cultural / multi-lingual education, in-service teacher training.

## Introduction

Rural areas throughout the world tend to have student populations with the lowest school performance, teachers with the least amount of training, and school curricula that are insensitive and or irrelevant to local realities. The social, political, and economic poverty experienced by these rural populations is

exacerbated by structural factors that prevent breaking oppressive cycles, and instead reproduce socioeconomic inequalities. One of these factors is the education system in which

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### Corresponding Author:

Katy de la Garza, 162 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
E-mail: [katydelagarzach@gmail.com](mailto:katydelagarzach@gmail.com)

populations that are rural, Indigenous and/or poor, disproportionately receive lower quality and culturally irrelevant formal education that does not consider their contextual realities (Barter, 2008).

Statistics are more alarming in rural areas inhabited by Indigenous populations due to numerous historical and structural factors related to colonial legacies of exploitation and discrimination. Inadequate teacher training combined with extreme poverty, the presence of multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities, as well as the government's inability to provide basic health and education related services, create school contexts that pose great challenges for effective teaching and learning to take place. This article explored these complex contextual realities in Guatemala while analyzing teacher perceptions of pedagogical mentorship as an in-service teacher training resource for schools in rural and Indigenous settings.

Guatemala is a predominantly rural country; half of its population is Indigenous; it ranks amongst the countries with the lowest socio-economic indicators in the Americas (Programa Estado de la Región, 2013). Guatemala has experimented with several government and international cooperation-sponsored mentorship programs for in-service rural teacher training. Mentorship has emerged as a favored model and policy initiative to improve the quality of teaching, making it a current "hot topic" in teacher education and professional development (Mullen, 2005). Mentorship-related programs for teacher education have been identified in more than a dozen Latin American countries. Guatemala offers an illustrative case for analyzing its impact and promise for enhancing quality teaching and learning.

Since the 1990s multiple mentorship initiatives have coexisted in Guatemala, many with the specific aim of enhancing the training and professional development of teachers in rural areas and Indigenous schools. With regards to teacher education, it was not until 2012 that, after months of heated debates

between the government and teachers unions, Guatemala finally joined all of the other Latin American countries in mandating primary school teacher education to take place at the university level. Prior to 2012, primary school teachers in Guatemala received their training while still high-school students themselves. Consequently, there are currently 100, 000 primary school in-service teachers with only a 3-year upper secondary school pre-service education; the government began to focus efforts on how to strengthen the education of those teachers who are in the field (Ministerio de Educación de Guatemala [MINEDUC], 2011). Building on previous initiatives, in 2011 a teacher-training program based on mentorship became institutionalized by government decree under the National System of School Mentorship (SINAE) to target in-service teachers working in school districts with the lowest socioeconomic indicators.

This article explores the educational realities of Guatemala's rural and Indigenous school communities, and teacher perceptions on the interactions these realities have with pedagogical mentorship programs.

### **The Guatemalan Context**

Guatemala is home to 14 million people and it hosts 25 linguistic communities. Over 50% of the population live in rural areas and are Indigenous peoples. The 36-year civil war the country experienced until 1996, together with structural discrimination and colonial legacies contributed to the current alarming socioeconomic indicators particularly for those who are Indigenous, rural, and poor (Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en America Latina y el Caribe [PREAL], 2008). Guatemala ranks 133 out of 187 countries in the United Nations Development Program's 2013 Human Development Index, placing it in the lowest position in the Latin American region. With regard to health indicators, Guatemala's chronic malnutrition rate is almost 50% and climbs to 70% for the Indigenous population, which is the highest in the Latin American region and one of

the top five malnutrition rates in the world (World Food Program [WFP], 2013). Although 50% of the total population lives in poverty and experiences high rates of malnutrition, approximately 20% of the Guatemalan population owns 64% of national income, making it one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (PREAL, 2008).

With regard to education, the Guatemalan government has historically had one of the lowest levels of public expenditure in Latin America, averaging 2% of GDP (Programa Estado de la Región, 2013). The inequality represented by the above figures is also experienced in the Guatemalan education system where rural areas and Indigenous peoples have the highest school dropout and illiteracy rates and the lowest educational achievement indicators (Patrinos & Velez, 2009; PREAL, 2008). During the past 20 years, the government has acquired numerous national and international legal obligations such as the Guatemalan 1991 Education Law, the 1995 Guatemala Peace Accords and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to increase educational opportunities and to enhance the quality of education for Indigenous and rural populations. This newfound focus on educational access has resulted in national primary school enrollment rates that are close to 90%.

In indigenous and rural areas enrollment rates are close to 90%. High enrollment rates can be deceiving since school dropout rates range between 70% and 80% and only three out of 10 (30%) Indigenous students finish primary school (PREAL, 2008).

Thus, school completion rates greatly vary when comparing urban and rural schools and Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Primary school completion rates for urban non-Indigenous children are close to 80%, while completion rates for rural and Indigenous children hardly reach 40% (PREAL, 2008). Moreover, in national language assessments for the third and sixth grade 62.8% of urban

students reached proficiency levels while only 41.4% of their rural peers did (Murillo, 2007).

Illiteracy rates also reflect this urban/rural and Indigenous/non-Indigenous educational divide since Guatemala's illiteracy rates linger at around 30%, but Indigenous illiteracy rates range between 50%-60%, with even higher rates for Indigenous women and rural populations (López, 2009; Patrinos & Velez, 2009). Throughout the school system, Indigenous languages are undervalued as a tool for learning and transmitting knowledge (Giuliani, 2008) and Spanish prevails as the dominant language for most educational, political, and economic activities even though 43% of the Guatemalan Indigenous population is non-Spanish speaking (PREAL, 2008). The aforementioned socioeconomic and educational inequalities pose great challenges for effective teaching and learning to take place.

I found numerous in-service training pedagogical mentorship programs in Guatemalan schools intended to increase performance indicators of rural and Indigenous students. These initiatives aimed to enhance rural teachers' academic preparation, promote *Educación Bilingüe Intercultural* (Bilingual Intercultural Education) (EBI), and improve the quality of education by providing in-school support for teachers through innovative methodologies that took into account multicultural, multilingual, and intercultural contexts (MINEDUC, 2012). EBI is a government policy that is intended to not only to provide bilingual education in Guatemala but also to promote interculturality, understood as intercultural dialogue where no culture was dominant over another and where ideologies of superiority are absent (Lopez, 2009). Since the 1990s EBI became a constitutional right but as this article will present, there is a great gap between theory and practice and mentorship programs can potentially offer a link between the two.

### **Mentorship Programs in Guatemala**

Mentorship has increasingly become a worldwide teacher education strategy to address inadequate teacher preparation, increase teacher retention, and enhance student performance. Critics of traditional mentorship models for teacher education have highlighted the importance of considering contextual factors such as culture and language of the target population (Comboni & Juarez, 2009; Talavera, 2002). In line with this global trend, Guatemala has embarked on numerous mentorship programs for primary school in-service teachers to contextualize the National Base Curriculum, improve basic learning competencies, decrease rural student drop-out rates, increase the implementation of EBI, and strengthen rural education quality indicators.

Mentorship has been part of the Ministry of Education's supervision framework since the 1990s. Mentorship was initially used as a control and supervisory tool; the pedagogical component was not a priority. The National Department of Bilingual Intercultural Education (DIGEBI) through the Departmental Divisions of the Ministry of Education (DIDEDUC) also began mentorship programs with EBI Technical Advisors (referred to as OTEBIs), which intended to provide in-service training and support to pre-primary and primary school teachers in EBI schools to improve bilingual education quality (de la Garza, 2014). Since the 1990s, multiple EBI Technical Advisor mentorship programs surfaced and disappeared, and pedagogical functions were often displaced by administrative and supervisory functions. The instability in funds and goals was mostly due to government administration priorities, Ministry of Education Departmental Divisions' politics, and changes in budget allocations.

The country's 36-year civil war and unstable democratic government led thousands of international and national NGOs and cooperation agencies to work in Guatemala with the government or in partnership with civil society groups (Sridhar, 2007). The international actors have been heavily involved

in education and within their education-related projects have supported various mentorship programs using bilingual promoters, mentors, and/or advisors. Similar to EBI Technical Advisors (OTEBIs), these mentorship programs brought by international actors also came and went with the organizations' funding, varying project length, donor priorities, and national politics (de la Garza, 2014).

Thus, there is a wide spectrum of mentorship programs coexisting throughout Guatemala that have as their common goal improving the quality of education in socioeconomically marginalized, rural, and Indigenous areas. This research builds on the experience of teachers and mentors in the following four mentorship programs: (1) the Ministry of Education's OTEBI program; (2) Pedagogical Advisors for the Academic Program for Professional Teacher Development (PADEP/D) of the University of San Carlos; (3) Support Program of Education Quality of the German International Development Agency (GIZ); and (4) National System of School Mentorship (SINAE) program.

The most recently active mentorship program was that of SINAE. The creation of SINAE arose from the need to redesign the Ministry of Education's school supervision framework and to support teachers in socioeconomically poor schools improve education quality. In 2010, the government sought the cooperation of multiple stakeholders that included various Ministry of Education offices as well as collaboration from teachers unions and the National School Council and the Ministry of Education Departmental Divisions, to rethink the supervision framework and build upon past pedagogical mentorship experiences such as OTEBI's, PADEP and GIZ programs (de la Garza, 2014). After numerous meetings amongst stakeholders, in 2011 through Ministerial Agreement Number 3639-2011, the Guatemalan government institutionalized a national, pre-primary and primary school mentorship reform with the creation of SINAE. SINAE began to execute its program with

technical support from the United States (USAID) and German (GIZ) cooperation agencies, USAID through its Classroom School Reform Program (REAULA) and GIZ through its Support Program for Education Quality (PACE).

The System's main goals are to ensure the application of the National Base Curriculum, educate students in a comprehensive/integral/ "whole" manner with basic competencies and significant learning experiences, transform classroom teacher practices, enhance education quality in accordance to the sociocultural characteristics of each school community, promote student achievement and learning, and increase the number of student grade completions and next grade enrollments (MINEDUC, 2012). Based on a bilingual and intercultural framework, the SINAIE mentorship model builds on previous mentorship programs and seeks to improve Guatemala's provision of quality education by providing pedagogical mentorship to teachers in geographic areas with the poorest socioeconomic indicators (MINEDUC, 2011).

Within the school mentorship system, *pedagogical mentorship* is defined by the Ministry of Education as "the technical action of mentorship on pedagogical practices in public schools which seeks to transform and better these practices" (MINEDUC, 2012, p. 44). While the definitions of mentorship vary greatly, most explanations of pedagogical mentorship agree that these actions are to be carried out by mentors who were former teachers and that in theory: (1) have between 5-10 years of teaching experience, (2) hold a university degree, (3) have fluency in the language used in the school district they are assigned to, and (4) have substantial knowledge of both the National Base Curriculum and EBI. While there is no official job description as of yet, the pedagogical mentor's main functions are to orient teacher practices toward the use and contextualization of the National Base Curriculum and the EBI model; participate in the design and formative assessment of school and teacher improvement

plans and quality circles; promote further teacher knowledge on student learning practices and evaluation through innovative pedagogical strategies; advise teachers *in* the classroom on the creation and use of improvement plans and EBI materials; and mentor teachers to reflect on their pedagogical practice, departing from their lived experiences within their specific context (DIGEBI, 2012).

The mentorship programs that have coexisted in Guatemalan rural and Indigenous schools have left an impact on teachers' practice and perceptions on the value and use of pedagogical mentorship. The following section explains the methodology used to explore rural teachers' challenges, experiences with pedagogical mentorship programs and perceptions of this resource as an in-service teacher training tool that contends to be sensitive to Guatemala's socio-cultural realities.

### **Methodology**

The empirical findings this article refers to are from a qualitative and multisite dissertation research study carried out during a one-year period (2012-2013) of fieldwork in Guatemala. The sites and participants for this study were chosen through purposive sampling and were criteria based.

The two departments (provinces) of Baja Verapaz and Quiché were selected due to: (1) their high levels of rural and Indigenous populations; (2) the existence of school districts that participated in SINAIE mentorship programs; and (3) they had a more than 10 year history investing in mentorship initiatives. The seven selected primary schools within these two departments were all officially declared rural, considered to be EBI schools by the Ministry of Education, and had a history of participation in mentorship programs. The number of students in each primary school ranged from 68 to 212; the number of teachers in each school from 4 to 10; and the percentage of students that spoke an Indigenous language at home was between 95 and 100.

Table 1  
Selected Departments' Characteristics

Administrative department	Rural	Indigenous	Language communities	Mentorship programs
Baja Verapaz	62%	60%	Achi', Q'eqchi', Poqomchi', K'iche', Spanish	PADEP/D pedagogical advisors, SINAIE pedagogical mentors, EBI technical advisors (OTEBI), and PACE-GIZ pedagogical mentors
Quiche	59%	83%	Uspanteko, Ixil, Sakapulteko, K'iche', Spanish	PADEP/D pedagogical advisors, SINAIE pedagogical mentors, EBI technical advisors (OTEBI), and PACE-GIZ pedagogical mentors

Sources: Gobierno de Guatemala (2010) and de la Garza (2014).

The teachers and mentors who participated in the study were part of the selected schools, and voluntarily offered to be interviewed. They agreed to have me as a participant observer in their classrooms. The 33 selected teachers had a permanent position within the Ministry of Education and had been teaching at the school for at least three years. These characteristics increased the probability of these teachers having had participated in SINAIE or other mentorship programs. The seven pedagogical mentors were also purposively selected and had served or were serving as mentors in one of the seven schools of the research study. Other research participants included 17 government and international cooperation staff related to the mentorship programs.

Two strategies were used for data collection: interviews and participant observation. While in-depth interviews gave me background information on the teachers' practice, the pedagogical mentorship model, and diverse perspectives of teachers and mentors; the more than 200 hours of classroom participant observation in grades one through six allowed me to better understand school

contexts, obtain information omitted in the interviews, and analyze relationships and behaviors. I lived with local families in the school communities, participated in teacher and community activities, and recorded daily observations. Interviews and participant observation allowed me to gain a greater understanding of pedagogical mentorship through the view of the participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

To further understand the contextual realities where these mentorship programs were taking place and to analyze teacher perceptions, the research focused on two main questions: (1) What are the main challenges facing primary school teachers in rural and Indigenous classrooms? and (2) To what extent can pedagogical mentorship assist in addressing rural teacher challenges? The next sections explore the findings to these questions.

### Challenges in Rural and Indigenous Classrooms

It's 9 a.m. and the children are falling asleep. The teacher asks them if they had breakfast at home and they nod their heads. A little boy asks "When is the *atol*

(vitamin enriched corn flour drink) arriving?" The teacher answers that real soon they will have it again and be able to drink it during recess. Since the kids are not paying attention and dozing off, the teacher decides to do songs and games in Achi' to wake them up and to help them forget they are tired and hungry. (Field notes, February 2013)

On my first day of classroom and participant observation at the schools, I encountered the complex rural and Indigenous realities of economic poverty, hunger, Spanish and Indigenous language-use code-switching, and the absence of education and health related public services. These contextual and structural conditions posed numerous challenges for teachers to be able to transform their classroom practices for effective teaching and learning to take place. My observations were confirmed by in-depth teacher interviews where teachers mentioned how their main daily challenges were related to economic hardships, government program absence and language-use issues.

The literature on rural schools indicates that poverty and nutrition are recurrent challenges for quality education to take place (See for example Ezpeleta & Weiss, 1996; Monk, 2007). To understand what poverty and malnutrition translates to for teachers and students in their daily classroom practices and experiences, I asked teachers the open ended question, "What are the main challenges for quality education to take place in rural schools?"

### **Economic Hardships, Malnutrition, and Government Absence**

All the interviewed teachers provided answers related to economic hardships, malnutrition, and the hunger faced by their students and their families as a main challenge for quality education. The following quote is typical of their responses:

Parents do not have enough economically so they have to leave for work very early, at 4 or 5 in the morning, and when the child wakes up there is not even a tortilla

for breakfast. They don't have breakfast. They walk a lot to get to school, and so they get here hungry, and they are falling asleep. (Interview with Carol, April 2013)

### ***The Need to Work***

Teachers explained that the need for all family members to work for the family's subsistence presented a serious challenge for the education of their students. Parents' and children's need to work often resulted in lack of parental involvement in the child's school life, family disintegration, children spending time working instead of studying, and tired and distracted students - all of which negatively affect the child's learning.

When looking for the causes of parents' absence, the most frequent explanations were economic hardships and, more specifically, the difficulty of finding stable jobs for subsistence in rural areas. The economic difficulties and extreme poverty faced by rural and Indigenous families led parents to leave their homes to find any kind of low wage labor in order to feed their families. Most of the jobs parents find in rural areas are seasonal, and after 12-hour workdays, they get paid approximately \$6 or \$7 US (\$0.50-\$0.55 US per hour). Nevertheless, there are months during the year during which no jobs are to be found, and there is an increased dependence on subsistence farming. Not everyone owns or has access to a plot of land, but those who do always have to deal with the unpredictable climate conditions that dictate land production. This creates highly unstable family income that results in a lack of access to basic needs in the household.

While internal migration to find jobs is an issue, in recent years economic hardships in the rural areas have created an increasing tendency to immigrate to the United States to seek employment. This immigration is mostly pursued by men and creates another challenge mentioned by teachers: family disintegration. Migration frequently leaves mothers or grandmothers in charge of numerous children, farming their small land plot, and selling their produce and/or crafts in local markets. At least

for the first two years after a family member arrives in the United States they are hardly able to send money back to their families since they must repay the approximately \$8,000 (US) that they owe to the *coyotes* or smugglers who facilitated their movement across the Mexican and U.S. borders. Immigration is a consequence of the lack of economic resources and job opportunities available in rural and Indigenous settings, which in turn has resulted in lack of involvement of both mothers and fathers in the schooling of their children.

Teachers spoke of the need for children to work as being another consequence of the economic hardships faced in rural and Indigenous settings, and a driver of school absences. While there have recently been important increases in school enrollment rates throughout Guatemala's rural areas (PREAL, 2008), many children work before school and/or after school in their homes, in agriculture, or in the local markets. In impoverished households, the help and/or income brought by children become crucial for family survival. These responsibilities at such a young age, together with deficient nutrition can adversely impact children's learning and their schooling experience. Some of the effects brought about by this need to work, and its associated parent absenteeism, that were mentioned by the teachers and observed during my fieldwork included students not doing their homework or being absent or tired because of their work, students lacking additional resources outside the school—such as books or television—to enhance their education, and students being so hungry that it impaired their cognitive abilities and learning.

### **Hunger**

The most frequently mentioned example of the consequences of the harsh socioeconomic realities of their students' households was that "children are hungry." The poverty experienced in the seven school communities created alarming problems of child malnutrition and hunger that directly affected teaching and

learning in the rural and Indigenous classrooms. All interviewed teachers made reference to the challenge posed by malnutrition, whether they called it lack of nourishment, vitamins, feeding, nutrition, or hunger. Teachers in rural and Indigenous classrooms said they could not provide quality education because of the current nourishment problem.

The nourishment problem the children faced in the seven Guatemalan schools, was mentioned by all teachers, and also observed by me in the classrooms. All teachers voiced the challenge that malnutrition and hunger posed in their classrooms and their lack of preparation for dealing with such realities. Teachers believed that children's lack of nourishment affected their mental development and school performance since students were often tired, sleepy, unresponsive, and distracted. The following quote exemplifies the importance teachers placed on the malnutrition of their students, and the negative consequences they thought it had on learning:

Malnutrition is what most affects learning and also the extreme economic poverty. As a cause of this, children come hungry, they come thirsty, and some are sleepy because of the work they have to do. (Interview with Rodrigo, March 2013)

These teacher understandings are supported by a large body of evidence that demonstrates the negative effects that malnutrition has on learning and educational achievement (See for example Bundy, 2011; Save the Children UK, 2013) and my own observations in the classrooms. The children in the Guatemalan classrooms I visited were tired, distracted, restless, dozing, and even falling asleep. According to the ten teachers who had previous teaching posts in urban schools, rural students experienced more extreme economic poverty and living conditions than their urban peers. These teachers also believed that the more severe economic hardships and malnutrition faced by rural children contributed to the lower test scores rural students often receive.



### ***Undependable government programs***

Teachers often mentioned that economic hardships and student malnourishment were further exacerbated by the absence or delay in access to government social programs. By law the Guatemalan state should provide education and health related programs and services to the poorest schools. However, the implementation of the government sponsored school feeding and educational materials programs suffered great delays in reaching rural schools. As school principal and teacher Beatriz said: “We are already in mid-April and we still have not received the funding for the food or the school materials.” (Interview with Beatriz, April 2013).

The Ministry of Education is in charge of the National School Feeding Program; a program that promotes healthy food consumption and school achievement, and aims to contribute to the reduction of malnutrition and chronic malnutrition, to enhance staying in school by providing one nutritional snack a day. The snack covers 30-35% of a child’s daily energy consumption and is to be delivered to prioritized pre-primary and primary schools in Guatemala (Dirección General de Participación Comunitaria y Servicios de Apoyo, [DIGEPSA], 2014). The school year begins in January, and yet by July 2013 less than half of this budgeted amount had been disbursed to the schools due to the government’s financial centralization and bureaucratic procedures. The effects of not having this snack were greatly felt by the teachers and students and they mentioned this is a common yearly practice.

The Ministry of Education is also in charge of providing schooling materials for children and teachers. The complex and long process for disbursement of this financial support program is similar to that of the school feeding program and consequently the seven schools did not receive the funds for school materials until April and May 2013. Teachers viewed this delayed support for school snacks and materials as an additional hurdle for effective teaching and learning to take place.

Teachers felt these delays occurred due to the strong disconnect and lack of understanding of Ministry of Education personnel about the realities encountered in rural and Indigenous school settings. As Hector mentioned: “The authorities need to get out of their desks, visit the rural schools and come see our reality...” (Interview with Hector, February 2013). Eighty-percent of the interviewed teachers believed education policies and teacher training programs were “urban-centric” (Vargas, 2008) or designed in the capital. They also believed that the policies and programs only favored the non-Indigenous, did not take into account Indigenous culture and languages, and did not consider contextual, cultural, and language realities.

The underlying causes for the lack of education quality in the rural and Indigenous classrooms were related to structural racism where a system of economic, political, and social institutions has historically excluded the rural areas and Indigenous populations from equitable wealth distribution and educational opportunities. This structural racism is like an “undeclared system of apartheid” through which the Guatemalan government works, in which rural and Indigenous peoples are constantly faced with discrimination and segregation (Interview with PACE-GIZ staff, September 2012).

The rural and Indigenous classroom exemplified this undeclared system of apartheid where economic hardships, malnutrition and government program delivery delays posed difficulties for effective teaching and learning to occur. Another area where segregation was experienced by Indigenous peoples was in their languages and knowledges, since the dominant culture and language of Spanish was favored in teacher education and curriculum content. This issue came to life when analyzing another main challenge mentioned by teachers: inadequate bilingual and intercultural education teacher training.

### ***The Language Challenge***

Here we talk about bilingual education but the government does not assist us. The reality is that it does not contribute; we have to see how we can learn to teach the language. . . . (Interview with Doris, April 2013).

In light of numerous research findings that reveal that one of the benefits of mother tongue development is greater proficiency in the second language (UNESCO, 2008), and pressures from the international community, the Guatemalan government has recognized multiple national and international agreements and obligations to a students' right to be educated in their native language, and to bilingual intercultural education (EBI). The original intent of EBI was to value both languages equally, make the Indigenous cultures visible, take into account learners' prior knowledges and help students to gain a stronger sense of identity (Benson & Kosonen, 2013). But there is a great lag between policy and practice. A study of bilingual education (Patrinos & Velez, 2009) showed that roughly 40% of Indigenous children in Guatemalan schools have access to EBI. However, having access to EBI does not necessarily translate into specific actions of implementation.

I witnessed this gap between EBI policy and practice in the seven EBI schools where an average of 98% of the student population had an Indigenous language as their mother tongue, and 27 of the 33 interviewed teachers spoke an Indigenous language. These statistics might mislead one to think that EBI is occurring in these schools because of its official status, the high number of Indigenous students, and the high percentages of Indigenous teachers who speak an indigenous language. Nevertheless, this was not the case since multiple cultural and structural impediments, such as inadequate teacher training on EBI, beliefs related to Indigenous cultural inferiority, and viewing Indigenous languages as a problem, remained,

and prevented linguistically and culturally relevant education from being enforced in Guatemalan rural and Indigenous schools.

The complexities and tensions that exist with bilingualism and the teaching and learning of Indigenous and Spanish languages in school make *el idioma* (the language) the second most frequently mentioned challenge by teachers. When asked, "What about language is the challenge?" the answers were generally related to deficient or absence of teacher education to carry out EBI, disinterest in achieving literacy in an Indigenous language, and the lack of exposure and previous knowledge of Spanish that rural Indigenous children have when they arrive at primary school.

The problem we have is that many of us speak the (Indigenous) language but we do not know how to write it. Nobody showed us how. . . . (Interview with Indigenous teacher Sonia, May 2013)

I do not speak K'iche' and I feel bad because I don't fit the profile. But what can I do if no one teaches me? (Interview with non-Indigenous teacher Beatriz, April 2013)

### ***Inadequate Training***

Inadequate teacher training in EBI was a main challenge mentioned by teachers when it came to carrying out quality education in both L1 (the mother tongue), which in the case of the seven schools was an Indigenous language, and in L2 (second language), which in this case refers to Spanish, as mandated by Guatemala's National Base Curriculum and the National Department of Bilingual and Intercultural Education (DIGEBI). The six non-Indigenous teachers and 20 out of the 27 Indigenous teachers declared being unprepared or inadequately prepared to effectively teach EBI. As evident from teacher Sonia's quote above, Indigenous teachers spoke their native language but did not necessarily know how to write, read, or teach it. Also, as teacher Beatriz explained, non-Indigenous teachers were assigned to an EBI school without

having been taught the Indigenous language of the school community. The teachers' experiences with bilingualism during their pre-service education and in-service training varied greatly amongst the Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees. This resulted in teachers having diverse levels of language skill and knowledge about EBI and to a general feeling of ill-preparedness.

All six non-Indigenous teachers and almost half of the Indigenous teachers (who were 31 years of age or older) did not have access to Bilingual Normal Schools (schools for teacher training) for their pre-service teacher education. The expansion of Bilingual Normal Schools gained prominence only over the past 15 years, which created an age gap between those teachers who had bilingual pre-service education and those who did not. At the time when teachers who were 31 years old or older went to primary and secondary school, Indigenous students were not allowed to speak their native languages in the classroom since *castellanización* (teaching of Spanish) was the norm.

Of the 12 younger Indigenous teachers interviewed, three of them did not grow up speaking their Indigenous language. These teachers were born in urban areas and their parents did not want them to speak the Indigenous language in order to protect them from the discrimination they would have to confront for not speaking Spanish well. These teachers mentioned having a hard time while attending Bilingual Normal Schools because even though they understood the language from listening to their parents, they themselves did not speak it. In the Bilingual Normal Schools they did learn how to write their Indigenous languages but they did not learn to speak them until they had to learn it *out of necessity* once they were assigned to work in a rural school.

The focus of Guatemalan Bilingual Normal Schools was on learning how to teach the National Base Curriculum's subjects of mathematics, social and natural environment, natural sciences and technology, social sciences,

artistic expression, physical education, citizenship, productivity and development, and language and communication in the official language of Spanish. The last curricular section of language and communication was where students learned about pedagogical practices in both L1 and L2. Nonetheless, according to most teachers, the hours spent learning about the Indigenous languages were few and not enough to effectively prepare them for the linguistic realities present in rural classrooms or to teach literacy in both Spanish and their mother tongue.

The bilingual education experience involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers varied in objectives, number of training hours, and educational levels; and these experiences created a complex and asymmetrical set of knowledge and understanding of the significance, purpose, and execution of EBI. During the past 15 years, changes have occurred in increased provision of Bilingual Normal Schools for teacher education. Teachers acknowledge the change brought by EBI legislation and government recognition of Indigenous languages in enhancing Indigenous language use in schools. However, teachers perceived that curricular content and practices in pre-service teacher education still did not prepare them effectively for teaching EBI, and in the case of non-Indigenous teachers, did not prepare them at all. This (un) changing teacher education contributes to teachers' feelings of ill-preparedness with regards to teaching EBI.

### **Attitudes and Beliefs**

Teachers' perceptions regarding the use of bilingualism, and their almost complete lack of mentioning concepts of interculturality, suggests the persistence of perceptions related to Indigenous ethnic inferiority, cultural ignorance, inadequate teacher education, and lack of government support and clarity on the purposes and execution of EBI policies and programs. This has resulted in what teachers describe to be a narrow implementation of bilingual

intercultural education in schools, where L-1 is only valued as transitional tool to the dominant Spanish language. These beliefs have also contributed to views of Indigenous languages as a problem for school advancement, with learners from non-dominant groups perceived as “deficient, even before they begin their school careers” (Benson & Kosonen, 2013, p. 2).

Teachers who perceived language as a problem believed using Indigenous languages in the school curriculum prevented rural school children from adequate grade advancement. Reasons for this included the great demands that the double workload (teaching and learning L1 and L2) posed on teachers and students. In their view, EBI rural schools required students to obtain skills and content in both the Indigenous language and the Spanish language. This double workload for teachers and students resulted in not being able to cover all the content and competencies assigned for the grade level, students falling behind, and grade repetition.

Other teachers argued that rural Indigenous students were at a disadvantage compared to their urban peers since rural students usually arrived to primary school with little exposure to Spanish and therefore had to begin learning L2 from scratch. Teachers attributed this lack of knowledge of Spanish to the limited availability of pre-primary schooling opportunities in rural areas; rural students’ and parents’ monolingualism and illiteracy; and rural students’ lack of exposure to newspapers, magazines, books, and television. The “language problem” was perceived as even more pronounced in the rural areas and results from superficial EBI teacher education programs and half-heartedly executed policies.

Teacher professionalization and in-service training programs may offer a platform for change. Contextually sensitive teacher education offers an opportunity to teach Indigenous histories, languages, and cultures through additive bilingualism – where both cultures and languages are equally valued- and where

government commitments can finally begin to transition from rhetoric to practice.

## **Teacher Experiences and Perspectives of Mentorship**

Interview findings and observations revealed that pedagogical mentorship programs could potentially assist in addressing the language challenge, change beliefs of cultural inferiority and superiority, and enhance teacher skills in bilingual and intercultural education.

Pedagogical mentorship was across-the-board accepted and demanded by all interviewed teachers in the seven schools, as an in-service teacher education resource to strengthen their EBI skills. However, high expectations and threats posed by patron-client relationships and discriminative language structures could defeat its pedagogical purpose and threaten the opportunity to provide more culturally and linguistically inclusive education.

### **Mentorship Meanings**

Interviews revealed that while teachers have been exposed to various programs of pedagogical mentorship, they developed similar ideas, hopes, and concerns around the concept. Teachers described pedagogical mentorship as *help* and *a support* that came to their classroom to orient their pedagogical practices. Likewise, mentors’ answers were also along the same lines and included, “*Mentorship means getting close to the teacher*” (Interview with mentor Eduardo, April 2013) and “*The objective is to help, orient the teacher to better her/himself in the classroom*” (Interview with Ministry of Education staff in Baja Verapaz, September 2012). Additionally, some of their answers focused on the relationship between the mentor and teacher as expressed in comments such as, “*It is help provided to the teacher by means of the mentor as his/her equal*” (Interview with PACE-GIZ staff, September 2012) and “*I teach them new things and they teach me*” (Interview with mentor Miriam, April 2013).

Mentors understood that many of the teachers they worked with had many years of in-class teaching experience and in some cases had even more experience than the mentors themselves. They recognized the knowledge both novice and more experienced teachers had acquired while teaching in rural and Indigenous classrooms and thus the importance of learning from each other and not just teaching them. Both teachers and mentors agreed that the function of the mentors was one of help and support and that the relationship was built on collaboration and walking together down the path of learning.

Teachers thus viewed pedagogical mentorship as an action where a peer or partner came to help and not supervise them in the classroom. When referring to the pedagogical aspect of mentorship, the teachers understood it as techniques, methodologies, and activities for teaching. There was a general consensus in the teacher and mentor perceptions that pedagogical mentorship meant supporting the teacher in the rural classroom with alternative pedagogical or teaching related techniques and practices.

### **Mentor Challenges**

The spectrum of programs teachers were in contact with resulted in different experiences related to the frequency and duration of the mentors visits. The teachers who were most often visited by mentors received a total of ten one-on-one visits, which included a combination of the visits from several programs, while the teachers with the least number experienced only one visit. Encounters also varied in duration, with some teachers visited for three hours while others were visited only for 30 minutes. Two of the main reasons given by teachers and mentors for these differences were related to the large number of schools and teachers assigned to each mentor; and the lack of extra resources for mentor transportation to the schools.

### **Mentor Dilemmas**

Pedagogical mentors were each assigned between eight and 25 schools and within them they were responsible for visiting 50 to 100 teachers. These large mentor/teacher and mentor/school ratios posed a great challenge for the mentors since the assigned schools were usually geographically scattered and difficult to access. Traveling to and from the rural schools was viewed as a major challenge for mentors since many times they did not get extra monetary or vehicular resources for their mentorship jobs.

These high mentor/teacher and mentor/school ratios together with the monetary burden of providing for their own transportation often led pedagogical mentors to choose to more regularly visit the schools that were closer to their place of residence, which often meant the schools closer to urban centers. Consequently, I found that the teachers who had received between five and ten visits from the pedagogical mentors were in the two schools that were closest to the municipal capitals, where transportation was less expensive and more frequently available. Reasons for visiting these schools included spending less money and time commuting, and not having to begin their journey to school before sunrise to arrive on time. For all the mentors, getting to rural schools took many hours of commute time and required paying high transportation costs, which often led mentors to only visit one school and one teacher per day; thus teachers had diverse experiences with the mentors.

### **Areas of Support**

Mentorship visits varied in frequency and length but they tended to provide support to teachers in two areas: (1) language and communication and (2) development of classroom materials. These two most frequently mentioned topics also included sub-topics and skills that teachers were mentored in. Table 2 summarizes the trends of the pedagogical mentorship areas of support provided to grades 1-3 (cycle I) and 4-6 (cycle II).

Table 2  
*Mentorship Areas of Support by Grade*

Grade	Language and communication	Classroom materials
1-3 <i>cycle I</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EBI</li> <li>• Basic reading and writing (L1 &amp; L2)</li> <li>• Games, songs (L1 &amp; L2)</li> <li>• National Base Curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning corners</li> <li>• Bilingual posters</li> <li>• Use of school context</li> </ul>
4-6 <i>cycle II</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Grammar improvement in Spanish</li> <li>• Reading fluency and comprehension in Spanish</li> <li>• National Base Curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posters for math, science, and technology</li> <li>• Bilingual posters</li> <li>• Use of school context for math</li> </ul>

### ***Language and Communication***

The Guatemalan National Base Curriculum has language and communication as the area where students are expected to develop competencies and learn content in the mother tongue (L1), a second language (L2), and a third language (L3). In the case of the seven chosen schools L1 was an Indigenous language (Achi' and K'iche' respectively), L2 was Spanish, and L3 was English. The four main components of the language and communication area for primary school included listening, speaking, reading, and writing in these languages.

Teachers received pedagogical mentorship in several areas included within language and communication: techniques for bilingual reading and writing, importance of bilingualism for effective learning, methodologies for teaching first graders, understanding of the National Base Curriculum's competencies and learning objectives, strategies for reading comprehension, creation of daily reading and writing routines; working in pairs with an advanced and a beginner reader, songs in Achi' and K'iche' to teach values, and use of old newspaper articles to promote reading, among others.

Mentors provided EBI-related teaching skills in both languages to teachers assigned to grades 1-3. Teachers assigned to grades 4-6 spoke mostly of being helped in enhancing their students reading and writing skills in *Spanish*, as they got ready to go to middle school in urban areas, and there was hardly any mention of L1 (the Indigenous language). Some of the reasons for this focus on Spanish were because many teachers believed that "Kids already speak their mother tongue, now is Spanish's turn". This reality led the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Rights to Education to find that 74% of Guatemalan children ages 7-12 had access to schooling only in Spanish and only 13% in Spanish and in a Mayan language (López, 2014).

### ***Development of Classroom Materials***

The focus given to EBI in the grades 1-3 and to Spanish in grades 4-6 was also common in the next most frequently mentioned area of mentorship: development of classroom materials. Mentors provided teachers with ideas on how to create classroom materials particularly related to the teaching and learning of reading and writing in L1 and L2 and in math.

In grades 1-3, materials developed were mostly assigned to “learning corners,” spaces in the classroom with materials and resources, representative of the students’ context and cultural components, where children could develop skills and construct knowledge by playing (MINEDUC, 2010). Some of the resources suggested for these corners included books, games and bingos related to reading and spelling in L1 and L2, materials made from local resources such as corn cobs for counting and learning about mathematical sets, and arts and crafts materials for the students to use and play with.

Mentors also shared ideas with teachers on how to do posters. I saw these posters in the 33 classrooms; they included signs with the Spanish and Mayan alphabet, key words and phrases in both languages, classroom values, cleaning committees, and self-attendance sheets, among others (See Figure 1). In grades 1-3, the focus of the posters was on EBI, where numbers, animals, values, and days of the week were often posted in both languages. In grades 4-6, the signs’ focus was on science, math, and technology in Spanish. Few posters were available in Mayan languages.



Figure 1: L1 Posters in second grade classroom



Figure 2: Use of learning corner corncobs *gusano* for learning the alphabet

### ***Incorporating the Local Context***

Mentors often gave teachers ideas for teaching activities, materials, and games which used the school grounds and the local environment. In grades 1-3, some of the activities I observed that mentors had shared with the teachers included going outside to draw vowels and letters with a wooden stick in the dirt; picking up leaves, sticks, and pebbles for basic math counting and learning colors; and the use of recycled materials such as bottle tops and corn cobs (See figure 2) for basic math and spelling skills. In grades 4-6, the school environment was mostly used for math examples where students identified geometrical shapes on the school grounds and in Indigenous women's traditional *huipiles* (blouses) and learned distances by using school areas such as the soccer field, hallways, roads, bus stops, or neighboring farms. The quotes below typify these learning experiences related to the use of the local context:

I had no idea how to work with first grade and he/she showed me how to work with bottle caps, letters, to do writing strokes in the sand. He/she also brought recyclable materials to do letters and have

the children work in pairs so if one cannot do it, the other one can push him/her. (Interview with Sara, February 2013)

In rural and Indigenous Guatemalan schools, where hunger and late arrival of schooling materials was the norm, these mentor recommended activities considered the local context, provided teachers with new ideas, and undiscovered resources to experiment with. Teachers greatly valued the visits of the pedagogical mentors, even though they were short and infrequent. This yearning for mentor visits was clearly expressed in teacher interviews and this acceptance provides an opportunity for professional development in EBI.

### **Yearning for Mentorship**

Teacher positive perception of pedagogical mentorship was evident. Only 7 of the 33 interviewed teachers mentioned having had a negative encounter with the mentors. The unfavorable experiences had to do with mentors who lacked the language abilities to be helpful in their school communities, possessed disrespectful attitudes, or attempted to supervise rather than to help teachers in the classroom.



Nonetheless, when I asked these seven teachers with negative experiences, and the other 26 with positive ones, if they would recommend and/or want pedagogical mentorship to continue in the future, all of them responded positively. Even those with bad experiences explained, “I do recommend it, in my case it was that I once got a person who did not have the right preparation” (Interview with Dina, April 2013). Teachers also mentioned that with the exception of those few negative experiences they did want pedagogical mentorship because the mentors almost always brought new ideas and they helped to share them among teachers.

There was demand on behalf of all the interviewed teachers for pedagogical mentorship. Teacher perceptions also revealed a great sense of promise for pedagogical mentorship to become a resource to enhance and contextualize teaching practices, and for educators to continue their professional growth. Teachers enjoyed the mentorship visits they received and they requested that these initiatives offer more pedagogical knowledge on particular topics associated with the realities of rural and Indigenous classrooms. These findings suggest that pedagogical mentorship can assist in addressing the rural teacher challenge of inadequate EBI education.

### **Mentorship to Address the Language Challenge**

The areas on which teachers had received pedagogical mentorship were mainly related to language and communication and elaboration of classroom materials. When I asked teachers “what topics would you like to receive support from the mentors to help enhance your teaching practice?” the most frequently mentioned area of support that teachers requested was bilingual intercultural education.

### ***EBI***

The desired areas of support in EBI included: information on how to explain to parents the

importance of EBI for their child’s literacy development and cultural enrichment; techniques and methodologies on how to teach L1 without texts; additional songs, stories, and culture related matters in Achi’ and K’iche’; and methods for fomenting reading, listening, and writing in the Indigenous language.

Our school is bilingual. We are required L1 [mother tongue-in this case Indigenous language] and we really were not trained to teach L1 and we do not have the tools to teach it in the four skills. . . . Mentorship could help us. (Interview with Celeste, May 2013)

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers said that they had not received adequate teacher education or training to teach the four basic language skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking in L1. While 99% of the children in the seven schools in this study spoke an Indigenous language, they did not necessarily know how to read or write that language. Moreover, while most Indigenous teachers fluently spoke Achi’ or K’iche’ as their mother tongue, they did not necessarily know how to read, write, or teach their native language. Teachers of all ages, levels, and ethnicities spoke about their lack of training and their desire to learn more about carrying out EBI in their schools. In their view, mentorship was a pedagogical resource that could potentially enhance their knowledge on EBI teaching and learning skills and lead to the provision of more culturally and linguistically responsive education for their student communities.

### **Reasons Behind the Demand**

Why was there such a positive acceptance of the programs and what could be the greater significance of this appeal? Underlying factors that contributed to this demand for pedagogical mentorship included the benefits of collaboration, rural teacher isolation, craving for new knowledge, and a need for support in teaching practices that were sensitive to the

challenges encountered in rural and Indigenous contexts.

The mentor-teacher dyad in the four pedagogical mentorship programs proved to be more collaborative than hierarchical and represented a learning partnership where both the mentor and teacher were co-learners (Awaya et al., 2009). The interviewed teachers valued collaboration. This cooperative partnership, where the mentor had no authority over the teacher in the relationship, was based on assistance, moral support, and knowledge construction. Teachers enjoyed the exploration and inquiry the process brought as well as the emotional support, reflection, and action. This feeling of teamwork implied moving beyond transmissive models toward more democratic ones that took teachers' experiences and context into account. Moreover, rural teachers felt *acompañados* (accompanied) in their daily tasks and this was deemed as comforting in their lonesome profession.

Teaching can be a lonely profession and in schools located in remote rural areas, where government services are greatly absent, the loneliness intensifies. This isolation is an underlying cause for pedagogical mentorships' acceptance and demand. The teachers in the seven rural schools constantly mentioned the lack of government and Ministry of Education presence in their school communities, which resulted in lack of basic health services, delays in the arrival of funds for school feeding programs and school supplies, constant teacher and principal absenteeism to go to the municipal capital to run school related errands, and the creation of a strong dependence and parallel administrative structure with NGOs and international cooperation agencies.

This reference to government absence was also made by teachers when sharing their difficulties in attending Ministry of Education training and professional development workshops, since most of the sessions were held in Guatemala City or in departmental municipal

capitals. Instead, pedagogical mentorship provided an opportunity for rural teachers to receive in-service teacher training and to create a space for collaborative learning within their rural classrooms, surrounded by their contextual realities. Mentors experienced the daily challenges that rural teachers faced in their multilingual, multilevel, multigrade, poverty stricken schools, and together they tried to develop strategies to improve student learning.

The demand for pedagogical mentorship was tied to this aspiration and the fact that the mentoring was provided within the school community. Teachers expressed their need and desire to acquire new knowledge about particular subject matter such as EBI. This desire to learn new strategies and skills to more effectively teach bilingualism and interculturality, evidenced the challenges brought by the presence of Indigenous languages and cultures in rural schools, for teachers who were ill-prepared to deal with these contextual realities. This plea provides a valuable opportunity for the government to advance its compliance with Guatemala's multiple legal commitments to provide linguistically and culturally inclusive education.

### **Looming Concerns**

While teachers shared a sense of hope for what pedagogical mentorship could offer, they also expressed common concerns. Interviewees expressed doubts about the future of pedagogical mentorship since they feared that programs' rhetorical intentions, spirit of collaboration and knowledge creation could be weakened by political power relations. Teachers worried that the upcoming mentorship programs would hire mentors who did not possess the right credentials and skills for the job.

Due to the looming concern over clientelism and political interests infiltrating the pedagogical mentorship process, the positive teacher perceptions and support for pedagogical mentorship also came with specific conditions

for the programs' effectiveness. The main requirement teachers perceived as essential for mentorship to be effective was language, as represented in Graciela's comment, "*I do support pedagogical mentorship but only if the mentor speaks the language*"; Interview, February 2013). Teachers shared a strong concern for the assignment of mentors to these positions that did not comply with the required profile, as the following quote shows:

They tell us they will send us a mentor. But many come from desk jobs and not from reality. They do not speak the language; they do not know the rural reality. Hopefully, this time it is done transparently with people who know the realities. (Interview with Hector, February 2013)

Teachers were also concerned that the program could become politicized, clientelistic in its hiring practices, and be overtaken by partisan politics that would threaten the integrity of the program and the potential of pedagogical mentorship to advance rural and Indigenous people's right to quality education. The government holds a powerful opportunity to change one of the main challenges rural teachers perceived they face: inadequate EBI training.

## Conclusions

This case study of Guatemala showed that the main challenges faced by teachers in rural and Indigenous schools (as perceived by teachers) were economic hardship, malnutrition, absence of government programs and inadequate teacher training for bilingual intercultural education. Teachers perceived pedagogical mentors as *help* and *support* inside their classrooms primarily in language and communication and in developing classroom materials. The high mentor/teacher and mentor/school ratios, and the long distances between rural schools without compensation for the traveling made mentor visits infrequent and short. Also, not hiring mentors that fill the job

profile – particularly those that do not have the school community's Indigenous language or that lack training in EBI- led to negative experiences with pedagogical mentors since they could not support teachers in their multi-linguistic and cultural classrooms.

But even with these program shortcomings, pedagogical mentorship was welcomed by all the interviewed rural teachers. Teachers perceived it as a resource and an opportunity to enhance their knowledge of EBI skills, to collaborate in their usually isolated endeavors, and to professionally develop within the school community. Teacher understandings and my observations revealed that pedagogical mentorship offers an opportunity for the government to implement the long overdue right to quality and culturally relevant education, by addressing and enhancing EBI training through the mentors. Pedagogical mentorship programs alone cannot transform rural and Indigenous classrooms. This in-service training resource is just one effort in the required inter-institutional endeavor to provide quality education that includes culturally and contextually relevant curricula, healthy and motivated students, competent teachers, active pedagogies, good governance, equitable resource allocation, and redressing of social inequalities.

An "apartheid of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002), which segregates the rural and Indigenous, still persists in Guatemalan rural education policies, teacher education, social program delivery and curricular content. The perceived apartheid is not only of knowledge but also of educational opportunity between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous dominant culture. Teachers are interested in learning how to change this state of affairs. This study provided insights into educational inequalities in rural and Indigenous schools, and also revealed teacher understandings, including the perceived promise of pedagogical mentorship as an in-service teacher training resource that can assist in the

transformation of teaching practices and curricular content to contextualize and incorporate rural and Indigenous cultures and languages.

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#### **About The Author**

**Katy de la Garza, EdD**, has worked on international development, social justice and education quality issues in Latin America for more than 15 years. She is currently the Strategy and Innovation Officer at Televisa Foundation, a non-profit that enhances educational opportunities for Hispanics in the U.S. Previously, she was country director for The Nature Conservancy Costa Rica, program manager for the U.S. Peace Corps Rural and Community Development Program in Costa Rica, and the client services manager for the international microcredit organization Pro Mujer-Programs for Women in Mexico. Katy holds a Doctorate in Education (EdD) from Teachers College, Columbia University; a Masters in International Development Management from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA); and a Bachelor of Science degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Her research interests and publications focus on bilingual and intercultural education, curriculum and socio cultural relevance, indigenous peoples and schooling, teacher education, gender and curriculum, and education policy.