

Resisting Westernization and School Reforms: Two Sides to the Struggle to “Communalize” Developmentally Appropriate Initial Education in Indigenous Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract

In 2011, Indigenous Initial Education teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, for the first time participated in an alternative teacher professional development effort (called a *diplomado*) to initiate community-appropriate bilingual programs for pregnant mothers and infants under 3 years old. Collaborating with parents and village authorities, the goals were Indigenous language revitalization/ maintenance and quality Initial Education, prioritizing communal values and Indigenous (non-Western) socialization practices. The teachers conducted various research tasks, one of which - the photographic and narrative documentation of young children's spontaneous learning opportunities in their communities - is analyzed here. A finding of this study is that even very young infants in their spontaneous activities display early indications of responsible actions toward others that develop into caring for community.

This effort to communalize Initial Education faces two intense oppositional pressures in Mexico today. For decades federal school policy has imposed on Indigenous teachers and communities Western-influenced views of developmentally appropriate ECEC, such as age grouping in care and school facilities and prioritizing teacher-organized and supervised activities. For Rogoff (2003), the imposition of Western views of ECEC denies the cultural nature of human development. In Oaxaca, only the Western view counts; the Indigenous perspective has been officially marginalized.

Recently, another layer of imposed federal and state school reforms places Indigenous teachers at risk. Now teacher preparation, hiring, and retention will be assessed by national standardized tests of teacher professional knowledge, without consideration for rural life experience, knowledge of community practices, or Indigenous language competence.

This article describes the status of communalized ECEC programs in Oaxaca given government repressions, and teacher resistance to these repressive school reforms.

Keywords

Education, education policy, educational reform, Indigenous education, ECEC, bilingual education, teacher education, Oaxaca, Mexico, community-based education, *diplomado*

Introduction

This article reports a recent effort in rural Indigenous Oaxaca, Mexico, intended to transform institutional practices of Early

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Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), not with the goal of better aligning them with global reform efforts focused on standardization and increased academics – quite to the contrary, it resists these efforts. Neither does it seek blindly to import Western views of “developmentally appropriate practices (DAP)” involving play, arts, music and child-initiated activities – these, too, are held up for scrutiny. The ECEC effort in Oaxaca resists both of these externally imposed orientations, prioritizing instead local, Indigenous values and communal child socialization practices that too often are overlooked and even denigrated in favor of imported definitions of DAP. The agents of change in this transformational effort are teachers of Indigenous Initial Education (who work with pregnant mothers and infants 0 to 3 years old) as part of a broad-based Pedagogical Movement to reconstruct intercultural bilingual education in the state of Oaxaca, based in the Indigenous values, priorities and communal practices known locally as *comunalidad*.

As the Mexican state with the greatest Indigenous population, Oaxaca has endured both historic and present repression inflicted on its original peoples; at the same time, rural teachers in Oaxaca have a history of struggle alongside Indigenous communities to defend educational and other rights. The reasons to struggle are varied and urgent. Seventy-five percent of the municipalities of Oaxaca are considered highly or very highly marginalized; almost half of all Mexican municipalities that are highly marginalized are located in Oaxaca. According to the 2010 census, two million Oaxacans speak one of over 50 Indigenous languages or language variants;¹ a majority of these Indigenous language speakers live in Oaxaca’s rural, impoverished communities. More than half of the municipalities export laborers to large urban centers, to the fields and maquiladoras of the northern Mexican states, or

to the U.S.² In 2013, 12% of Mexico’s 223,144 basic education schools had no water and many had no functional bathrooms or lighting (Bacon, 2013); such schools dot the Oaxacan landscape. Consequently, along with hopes for improved job possibilities, pursuit of educational opportunities for their children motivates Oaxacans to abandon their rural communities and emigrate abroad.

In March 2001, on the occasion of its 27th anniversary, the Coalition of Indigenous Teachers and Promoters of Oaxaca (Plan Piloto-CMPIO)³ publicly denounced the situation of Indigenous education in the state: “Education in Indigenous communities is in complete abandonment. Intercultural bilingual education only exists in political rhetoric, and the authorities seem either ignorant of this situation, or disinterested” (Soberanes, 2003b, p. 6).

This public denunciation of educational abandonment in Oaxaca was the result of a powerful process of consciousness-raising by the Coalition’s own teachers. Soberanes (2010) comments: “For many years, we teachers of Indigenous education have been instruments of education policies that have tended toward the disappearance of original peoples by enabling their incorporation, assimilation, or integration into the dominant mestizo culture” (p. 105). Recognizing their participation, both conscious and unconscious, in this grim educational reality, and with the intent of constructing together with local communities a transformed Indigenous education, in 1995 Plan Piloto-CMPIO began the Pedagogical Movement, an inclusive effort of children, parents, teachers, committed intellectuals, communal authorities and other community members, broadly focused on constructing educational alternatives that respond to the needs and conditions of life in the Indigenous communities of Oaxaca (Soberanes, 2003a; Soberanes, 2003b; Soberanes, 2010).

The Pedagogical Movement provides the philosophical foundation of the *Diplomado⁴ in Community-based Initial Education*, described here, a ground-breaking professional development effort intended to prepare Indigenous early educators as teacher-researchers to document, celebrate, and incorporate into their own teaching the communal child socialization practices of the rural Indigenous communities where they teach.

Literature Review

“Communalizing” Indigenous ECEC

In Oaxaca, *comunalidad* is the term used to designate the collective communal governance structures, values, priorities and practices of Indigenous communities (Martínez Luna, 2003). According to Maldonado (2002; 2004), *comunalidad* is the historic foundation of Indigenous life, identity and cultural resistance. This pervasive sense of communal belonging is the culmination of a continuous, profound process of civic formation by means of which villagers, virtually from birth, are collectively socialized beyond individualism or family priorities to absorb communal responsibility into their personal values.

In 1995, in response to Indigenous and teacher union pressure, *comunalidad* was written into the State Education Act as the fourth guiding principle of educational practice (Martínez Luna, 2010). Still, despite its fundamental importance to Indigenous existence and identity in Oaxaca and its presence in state law, *comunalidad* has had little impact on the system of public education in the state, a system that, although supposedly decentralized from federal to state control in 1992, still retains for the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) in Mexico City virtually unlimited control over administrative and curricular decisions that affect all school levels, including Initial Education. In recent years, two efforts in

Oaxaca to legally mandate and institutionalize *comunalidad* in public education – the “Plan to Transform the Education of Oaxaca (PTEO)”, a joint collaboration in 2012 between the Oaxaca State Institute of Public Education (IEEPO) and Oaxaca’s powerful teachers’ union affiliate, Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE); and in 2014, a proposed new education draft law crafted from 383 proposals for education reform generated in public forums statewide – were legislatively ignored. Instead, the national, normative approach to schooling, tightly controlled by the SEP, pays scant attention to minoritized, local priorities such as Indigenous *comunalidad*.

This disparagement of the “local” in favor of federal assimilationist policies is not surprising. The cultural rights and priorities of minoritized Indigenous groups within the Mexican nation have historically been marginalized and discounted. In multiple international agreements, most recently the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, the Mexican nation promised to respect the linguistic, cultural, territorial and other rights of Indigenous Peoples within its national territory and to grant them educational autonomy. These promised rights are foundational to the struggle for culturally appropriate Initial Education in Indigenous Mexico. Yet over and over again the Mexican nation has demonstrated that Indigenous educational autonomy is an empty promise, and that the yawning gap between promise and reality in Indigenous education that has endured for decades, if not centuries, continues unabated today.

Resisting Westernized “Developmentally Appropriate Practices”

Significantly, Oaxaca is not alone in the effort to resist standardized, universalized definitions of “developmentally appropriate” ECEC and to

pursue localized educational priorities. For several decades, international investigations by both Western and non-Western researchers (Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989; Wollons, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Arzubiaga & Adair, 2013) have documented highly distinct approaches to the education of young children in diverse countries around the world (e.g. China, Japan, the U.S., Vietnam, Russia, Israel, Turkey, France, Mayan Guatemala), while also acknowledging the historical and political contexts which have contributed to these diverse approaches.

Tobin (2005), an "unreformed cultural relativist," contends that national standards such as those that promote low student-teacher ratios, multicultural and bilingual education, and mediation during children's disagreements, may be appropriate in the U.S. However,

[t]hese standards become a problem when we lose sight of the fact that they are cultural and contextual and not universal...; when they are applied, imperialistically, to systems of early childhood education outside of our country; and when they are imposed on communities within the United States who do not fully endorse the values and beliefs of the dominant culture. (2005, p. 426)

According to Tobin, U.S. educators must "challenge our taken-for granted assumptions that quality standards are universal, generalizable, and non-contextual" (2005, p. 424).

Rogoff concurs, and strongly advocates for a way to accomplish this provocative challenge: engage in, or at least be familiar with, "cultural research," that is, research documenting child development and socialization processes as they occur outside of Westernized U.S. settings (2003, p. 7). Citing scores of international child development and socialization studies, including

her own documentation across decades of infants' learning processes in Indigenous Mayan Guatemala, she succinctly and unambiguously states her view: "Human development is a cultural process" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3). For example, there are vast differences in community "time tables" of expectations for children's participation during childhood, such as the age at which children are entrusted to care for younger infants or to use potentially dangerous implements. However shocking or dangerous one community's "time tables" may seem to another community, such as our own, Rogoff's message is clear: expectations for child development are deeply and historically embedded in, and inherently appropriate for, their local community and cultural context. (2003, p. 4)

Significant cross-cultural research, then, supports the effort to localize Initial Education, or in Oaxaca's case, to "communalize" it. Community-based priorities for child socialization and early education problematize universal assertions about "what is known about how young children learn best," or generalized judgments about what practices and curricula are "not developmentally appropriate." In Oaxaca, Western assumptions about developmentally appropriate practices in early education are resisted in favor of promised, though rarely granted, community educational autonomy.

Resisting Mexico's Federal School Reforms

In global diplomacy, Mexico appears to agree with Tobin's and Rogoff's views regarding the critical importance of, and the human right for, locally and culturally relevant early education for young children, especially in Indigenous and other minoritized communities. But by all indicators, Mexico's many signed international agreements regarding culturally respectful early

education are little more than official rhetoric, for the nation neither reflects in education policy nor practices in the field what it internationally preaches. Instead, it imposes federal “school reforms,” including constitutional amendments and labor reforms that abrogate teacher contractual agreements and restrict and standardize who can teach and how instruction is to be implemented.

In 2013, Mexico’s ruling party, the PRI, orchestrated expansive reforms to the Mexican Constitution, with particular focus on education. According to the government, the reforms “reconfigured the structure, planning, operation and evaluation of the National Education System, ratified the right of every individual to receive an education, and defined the State as the responsible entity to guarantee this.”⁵ However, according to Oaxaca’s dissident Section 22,⁶ the reforms’ intentions are to privatize public education, with consequences that are pervasive and debilitating, not only for teachers, but for Mexican society as a whole, and especially for impoverished Indigenous communities. For example, with the reforms, public school teachers’ hiring, promotion and retention are now based entirely on standardized test scores, with little if any consideration for local needs or teachers’ communal funds of knowledge. Massive teacher firings based on standardized test scores have begun and are anticipated to increase.

The reforms have serious implications for civil society, as well, according to Section 22 lawyers. The government has announced that 100,000 small rural schools will disappear through school consolidations, to be replaced by larger and arguably better-equipped schools often located considerable distances from the children’s homes and communities. Parents are expected to pay school utility bills and are responsible for facility upkeep and repairs. And crucial for this study, efforts are in place to

eliminate Initial Education as an education level throughout the Mexican school system.

According to Bacon (2013), U.S. corporate and financial interests are deeply invested in these education reforms:

A network of large corporations and banks extends throughout Latin America, financed and guided in part from the United States, pushing the same formula: standardized tests, linking teachers’ jobs and pay to test results, and bending the curriculum to employers’ needs while eliminating social criticism.

In addition to global corporations such as Coca-Cola and Ford, and giant media networks like Televisa, groups that lobby for these reforms in Mexico and Latin America receive assistance from the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

While the massive and politically aligned Mexican National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) supported these federal reforms, the dissident democratizing segment within the SNTE, called the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), immediately called for teacher resistance. Oaxaca’s Section 22 is a leader within the dissident CNTE, and its teachers, reinforced by considerable parent and civic support throughout the state, have taken to the streets and the courts since 2013 to resist, temporarily managing to hold back implementation of some of the reforms in the state, but at considerable cost. Their strategies include pedagogical proposals such as the PTEO, judicial efforts such as legal challenges to the law, defense of incarcerated protesters, and criminal investigations of teacher disappearances and assassinations, and political efforts like the proposed but rejected state education law prioritizing *comunalidad*, as well as massive marches, blockades of highways,

government buildings or commercial centers, and sustained strike encampments.⁷ The state and federal governments have responded brutally, militarizing with thousands of armed troops states like Oaxaca where the resistant CNTE is active, "disappearing" teacher union leaders or arresting them and banishing them to federal prisons in distant Mexican states, retaining teacher union leaders' salaries and freezing union bank accounts, violently destroying strike encampments, and arresting and killing protesters, whether teachers or community members.

Still, resistance to the immense structural reforms continues today in Oaxaca, despite police militarization and intense psychological warfare conducted against the protesters by a massive media campaign. According to Fernando Soberanes,⁸ veteran Section 22 activist and one of the drafters of the proposed but legislatively rejected education law, *comunalidad* has not been defeated – due to Oaxacan teacher and civic pressure, a new education law recently passed by the State Legislature still retains some elements of *comunalidad* that deviate from the mandates of federal school reforms.

How has Initial Education fared given Mexico's education reforms and the ensuing teachers' union resistance? In the 25 years since the establishment of Mexico's Program of Indigenous Initial Education (PREII), successive policies have focused on this early educational level, culminating in a reform in 2010 that produced new curricular guidelines (Dirección General de Educación Indígena, 2010). Despite these new policies and curricular designs, no attention has been given to soliciting community input in order to discern minoritized perspectives on early childhood socialization for Mexico's diverse Indigenous population, or to reorient teacher education toward communal perspectives, values and practices. In Mexican

states without strong dissident CNTE and civic resistance, Indigenous early education has been under intense threat of elimination. Far from prioritizing, encouraging, or even permitting that the fundamental Indigenous values of *comunalidad* influence Initial Education or any other education level, recent Mexican education reforms rigorously pursue an accelerating agenda of homogenization and standardization in the preparation and evaluation of both students and teachers, under the banner of global competitiveness and "increased opportunities for all."

Despite powerful teacher and community resistance to the imposed reforms, there presently exist no institutional opportunities in Oaxaca for professional preparation of Initial Education teachers in ways that reflect the diversity of the state's Indigenous challenge.

Teacher Preparation for "Communalized" Initial Education Purpose and Goals of the *Diplomado*

Faced with this professional development void, and committed to pursuing the principles of the Pedagogical Movement, in particular to work collaboratively with communities toward an alternative education based in *comunalidad*, in 2011 Plan Piloto-CMPIO planned and implemented the *Diplomado in Community-based Initial Education*, the first professional development effort in Oaxaca focused specifically on Indigenous early educators and officially financed and accredited by the state public education system.

The commitment to develop the *diplomado* grew out of Plan Piloto-CMPIO's assessment that the government, despite multiple international agreements to the contrary, was committed through its policies and actions to assimilationist approaches rather than local autonomy in its work with babies and

toddlers and their parents in Indigenous communities.

Official approaches to the education of these very young children, which international funding agencies frequently encourage and support, focus on 're-training' Indigenous parents, especially mothers, to abandon communal childrearing priorities and practices in order to adopt practices promoted by Western theories of child development. Individualism and the acquisition of the Spanish language are unquestioned assumptions and priority outcomes of these official assimilationist programs" (Soberanes, 2010, p. 110).

The goals of PP-CMPIO's *diplomado* were: (a) to enrich the communal knowledge of the young teacher participants; and, (b) to provide participants with necessary research skills to investigate, document and honor local community practices of child socialization and children's learning processes, including language acquisition; in order, (c) to collaborate with communities on the creation of an authentic, alternative, bilingual, and community-appropriate Initial Education.

These goals contrast starkly with universalized assimilationist priorities for Initial Education; instead, they prioritize communal perspectives on early infant socialization. In an effort to concretize multiple international agreements signed across the years by the Mexican nation, the *diplomado* sought to provide Initial Education teachers with the knowledge and skills required to research Indigenous children's communal contexts, language usage, and processes of learning. These rural communities suffer high rates of

emigration and increasing loss of their Indigenous languages in younger generations; nevertheless, they often retain communal practices of infant socialization vital to the continuation of their Indigenous cultures.

Research Design

Research Questions

The research questions embedded within the goals of the *diplomado* were:

1. How can young, inexperienced Indigenous teachers with no professional teacher preparation be equipped with the knowledge and skills to value, investigate, and document child socialization practices and young children's learning processes in their local Indigenous community?
2. What are the local socialization practices by means of which each community "teaches," and young children learn, the communal practices, values and mutual obligations of *comunalidad*, including use of the local Indigenous language(s)?
3. How can educators collaborate with community members to transform Indigenous Initial Education, so that "developmentally-appropriate" ECEC is understood to incorporate and prioritize local practices, including Indigenous language use, through which communities socialize young children into *comunalidad*?

Structure and Methods

Plan Piloto-CMPIO's *diplomado* lasted 12 months (July 2011- July 2012) and involved 200 intense contact hours in multiple weekend and two summer workshops, as well as consultation visits to the teachers in their communities.

Taking seriously the diverse Indigenous locales and communal practices across the state, many *diplomado* sessions were spent introducing participants to various qualitative

research methods that they then employed to gather information about specific child socialization practices and young children's language and learning processes in their particular community of practice. These research methods included: autobiographies of the teachers' own linguistic and educational histories; surveys of language use in homes and the community; interviews with mothers and grandmothers; biographies of infants, with particular attention to pregnancy and birth practices; documentation of community events, including obligatory, unpaid communal labor carried out for benefit of the community (called *tequio* in Oaxaca); and photos and narrative explanations of infants' spontaneous activities. In their final portfolios of research evidence, the teachers submitted the results of the data collection tasks they had carried out in their local community, accompanied by signed confirmation by community and educational authorities that the tasks had been successfully completed.

Participants

All *diplomado* participants were Indigenous females, mostly in their early 20s, representing 7 of Oaxaca's 16 Indigenous ethnolinguistic groups. In the end, 35 participants submitted the required portfolio of research tasks in order to be considered "completers" and receive Oaxaca State Institute of Public Education (IEEPO) accreditation for the *diplomado*. All 35 completers had lived for years in rural Indigenous communities of the state; however, only 27 were first language speakers of their Indigenous language. Seven Indigenous languages were represented among them, including diverse variants of these languages.

Twenty-eight of the 35 completers (80%) consented to have their portfolios analyzed. Consented completers' quoted texts are accompanied here by their Indigenous ethnicity,

and with only one exception, the participants also requested that their real name and the name of the community where they serve be included. The one who requested anonymity has been given a pseudonym.

Analysis of Infants' Spontaneous Activities in Communities

Only one of the portfolio research tasks is analyzed here – photographs that the teachers took of spontaneous activities of infants and preschoolers inside or outside their home, or in multiple sites in the community, along with teachers' narrative explanations of each photograph.⁹ By spontaneous activities, we mean activities that the infants carried out on their own, without teacher planning or apparent parental request, and which the teachers documented photographically and described through field notes. The present study complements an earlier study in this journal (Meyer, 2016) in which participant teachers' linguistic and educational autobiographies were analyzed.

The timing of the *diplomado* and of this analysis of photos and narratives deserve comment. The year-long *diplomado* formally ended in 2012, before the federally orchestrated education reforms of 2013. Still, rumblings of impending changes were apparent, though uncertain, throughout the *diplomado*, causing uncertainty and urgency among participants and facilitators. The present analysis of photos and commentaries took place in fall 2014, after federal education reforms were ratified by the Mexican Congress. Their ratification began a massive and continuing movement of resistance by the CNTE nationally and by Section 22 in Oaxaca (resulting in several civilian deaths in Oaxaca in June 2016). As this analysis was underway, my colleague analysts, who are committed activist members of Section 22, were

constantly called on to participate in CNTE meetings and protests.

Various reflections could be made about the timing of this data analysis process within its political and educational context. I only offer here my profound respect to the *diplomado* participants who committed time to investigate the activities of infants in their communities as part of their portfolio tasks during this tumultuous time, and to my co-analysts, Plan Piloto-CMPIO Pedagogical Committee members, who managed to rob time from their resistance efforts to focus attention on urgent community-based pedagogical concerns during a period when their own professional futures and educational priorities were profoundly at risk.

Findings

Research Question #1: How were the participants prepared as teacher-researchers?

Before describing the analysis itself, an explanation is warranted as to how these novice Indigenous teachers were prepared in the *diplomado* with the research skills to photograph and narrate the spontaneous activities of very young children in their communities in their effort to “value, investigate, and document child socialization practices and young children’s learning processes in their local Indigenous community” (research question #1)?

Today studies that document and analyze the daily activities of young children are familiar, though various researchers caution that most of these are conducted in Western cultural settings (Greenfield *et al.*, 2003; Rogoff *et al.*, 2007; Rogoff *et al.*, 2010). Both Western bias and cultural blindness have promulgated the belief that individualistic, academic and Western assumptions about infant development and child socialization are “universal,” impacting the field both nationally and internationally (Tobin, 2005; Hedge & Cassidy, 2009; Fler, 2003).

However, in recent decades researchers have studied the daily activities of children of different ages in diverse cultural contexts, identifying “activity scenes” that include those who interact with the children, the motivations of all present, the cultural scripts that influence the scene, and indications within the interaction as to the cultural purposes, values, beliefs and goals of all actors (e.g. Remorini, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff *et al.*, 2007). These studies, often conducted by anthropologists and psychologists, have found notable differences between cultures, including if and when children are separated into age groupings, or how often they have opportunities to observe and even participate in the daily activities of adults in their worksites or in community tasks and encounters (Rogoff *et al.*, 2010; Rogoff, 2014). International studies have also contrasted the learning processes and environments of children who “learn by observing while pitching in (LOPI)” in collective, community-based and familial activities, with those who learn mainly through Westernized, school-based “learning through assembly-line instruction,” where adult guidance and control is prominent (Rogoff, 2014).

Most international studies reviewed for this analysis were conducted by researchers who are recognized academics, some of whom are not native to the country or cultural context they study. Often they have research expertise and advanced degrees from Western academic institutions.

The present analysis differs in several important ways from the studies just described:

1. All the teachers whose photos and descriptive commentaries of children’s spontaneous activities are analyzed here were born in Oaxaca, though not necessarily in the community in which they now teach. None were strangers to the local context or to the children and families they documented, as all were working in the

community directly with the children when they submitted their portfolios. Some had worked in their present community for a few months, others for several years, and some were native to the community.

2. Twenty-seven of the 35 completers identify themselves as fluent speakers of their Indigenous language, though not all speak the local language or variant of the community where they teach. Even those who do may not use the local language with the children (an important distinction), instead opting to use Spanish with families and children alike. Many factors complicate language use in these Indigenous communities. The community may be multilingual, with families that speak diverse Indigenous languages, only one of which the teacher speaks. Or the teacher may be assigned to a community outside her linguistic region. Also, given pervasive Indigenous language loss in these communities, it is not unusual today that the children may have little exposure to the Indigenous language in their home, making Spanish their stronger and preferred language. (There is some evidence of this in the language use documented in the photo narratives.) All of the teacher participants, regardless of their proficiency in an original language, were proficient and literate in Spanish, the language in which the data in their portfolios were documented and submitted.
3. The teachers did not "set up the scenes" they documented by introducing new and unfamiliar activities or toys into their encounters with the children. To the contrary, our interest was to record the spontaneous activities of children wherever these occurred, to note any materials they chose to use and any dialogues with others

that ensued, in an effort to identify these youngsters' informal processes of learning in their communities.

4. These teachers had no previous formal academic training to conduct research. The research strand of the *diplomado*, which this author facilitated, prepared them to carry out various qualitative research methods pertinent to their work in the community, including interviews, linguistic surveys, and ethnographic observations, among others. They were prepared to do so during *diplomado* sessions in a cyclical and applied way. That is, after a preliminary orientation to each data collection method, the participants returned to their communities to apply the method and record their data. At the following *diplomado* session, they shared their data in small working groups or in plenary sessions in order to refine their documentation, aided by comments and suggestions made by their colleagues and the facilitators. Sharing and comparing data from Indigenous communities across the state initiated a collective process of reflection and analysis that itself reflected the *diplomado's* commitment to *comunalidad*.
5. Each portfolio included two letters attesting to the validity of the documentation submitted, one written by the teacher's educational supervisor, the other by a village authority. These letters certified that the research tasks carried out by the teacher were recognized and approved in both the educational and communal spheres of her work.

The research processes described above characterize "practitioner action research," a specific form of qualitative research deemed appropriate for the purposes of the *diplomado*

and its participants (Stringer, 2013). Practitioner action research seeks *concrete changes* in teachers' *practices*, as they reflect and theorize based on the documentation which they themselves have collected in their community with communal approval; their reflections are then shared in their research community in order to deepen, refine and socialize their discoveries. During the *diplomado*, participants engaged in the continuous cycle of reflecting, theorizing and acting that constitutes practitioner action research, with the goal of addressing real community problems and transforming their pedagogical practice in ways that both respect and reflect local Indigenous *comunalidad*. To honor the depth and quality of *diplomado* participants' research accomplishments despite their youth, teaching inexperience, and lack of academic credentials, they will be called "teacher-researchers" throughout the rest of this paper.

Significantly, three of the four analysts of these photographic data – Julian Jiménez Ramírez, Lilia Martínez Pérez, and Javier Mendoza Almaráz - are Plan Piloto-CMPIO teachers and members of the Coalition's Pedagogical Committee. They, too, are Oaxaca natives and Indigenous language speakers, who differ from the teacher-researchers only in their multiple years of teaching experience in the field. The fourth analyst (this author) is an applied linguist and bilingual educator who has collaborated with Plan Piloto-CMPIO for more than 17 years and who was involved, along with the other analysts, in planning and implementing the *diplomado*. As the only proficient English language user, and with Plan Piloto-CMPIO approval, all translations of cited data into English are hers.

Research Question #2: What are the practices and processes whereby communities "teach," and young children learn, the practices and priorities of *comunalidad*, including use of the local Indigenous language(s)?

The following analysis is based on careful attention to the submitted documentation of only one of the research tasks in the final portfolios submitted by the 28 consenting teacher-researchers: photographs of young children's spontaneous activities wherever in the community these were encountered, and the teacher-researchers' narrative field notes accompanying each photo. The photographic and narrative documentation, along with several other research tasks submitted in the portfolios, intended to answer research question #2: What are the local socialization practices by means of which each community "teaches," and young children learn, the communal practices, values and mutual obligations of *comunalidad*, including use of the local Indigenous languages?

As we poured over the accumulation of photos and narratives documented in the portfolios, the scenes of young children's spontaneous activities began to differentiate themselves in significant ways. First, we found examples of young children's careful observation of everyday adult activities happening around them, while they seemingly remained on the periphery, without actively participating.

We then identified a second large collection of photos where children engaged directly and actively with people, objects and natural materials in their local environment. Here we distinguished three types or moments of young children's direct action, which we have identified in this study as a *trajectory of informal active learning*. In Type 1 actions, the children observe and imitate an action as it is being carried out or modeled in their presence.

In Type 2 actions, children imitate an action spontaneously at a later time and in a new context, that is, independently, without the immediate presence of the modeled action. A third type or moment consists of creative actions by even very young children, which display their ability to generate novel solutions to immediate contextual problems and to mobilize the will to act, seemingly no longer merely imitating others. Our *trajectory of informal active learning* confirms Rogoff's concept of young children "learning while observing and pitching in (LOPI)" (Rogoff, 2014), while further distinguishing distinct, observable LOPI types or moments.

The presence of the narrative field notes allowed us to identify a third, smaller set of spontaneous learning processes in these communities: learning through direct, physical action in culturally unremarkable settings, but now accompanied by oral dialogue ("scaffolding") with someone older, often but not always an adult. Finally, and much less prominent in the photos, were very limited data displaying young children's presence and learning during *tequio* scenes of collaborative community labor, a photographic absence initially puzzling to us as researchers, as we will explain below.

Learning Through Attentive Observation

Many studies of the daily activities of young children in non-Western communities, especially those of Rogoff and her collaborators, document that the children witness and intently observe, and may "pitch in on," daily tasks and activities of adults (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff *et al.*, 2007; Rogoff *et al.*, 2010; Rogoff, 2014). The phenomenon of attentive observation of the activities happening around them was very evident in the Oaxacan photos and commentaries, though preschool children did

not always join in on the activities they observed.

Photo after photo across communities captured young children carefully observing activities in many settings: daily tasks carried out by their parents; forms of play or childcare of older siblings; games played by or with their young peers; community events; use of various utensils in the home, garden or field; and care of animals. Significantly, most of these photos show children observing home or community activities that are significant economically to the family or community, such as women planting and tending crops, or men harvesting fish to take to market. One example of many such photos was described by Nancy Piamonte Sumano in the Huave coastal community of Huazatlán del Río, San Mateo del Mar, Tehuantepec, a community known for its waist-loom textile weavings: "*Here the mother is weaving a napkin. The little girl carefully observes the process of the activity her mother is doing.*"

Of particular interest to the analysts were a few photos where the children are attentively observing collaborative *tequios*, Oaxaca's term for unpaid collaborative labor on behalf of the community. By witnessing *tequios*, from a very early age the children learn to appreciate the importance of shared work for the benefit not just of one's own family, but of the community as a whole. A photo and narrative of a collective *tequio* task was provided by Élvia Torres Chávez in the Mixtec community of San Juan Diquiyú, Tezoatlán, Huajuapán de León: "*Here we see how the mothers gather to clean the patio of the school. [...] Standing nearby, we see the little girl watching the mothers; this is how this activity gets transmitted to future generations.*"

Such *tequio* tasks and preschoolers' presence during them were only infrequently documented in the submitted photos, as we will comment below.

Learning through Direct, Physical Action with People, Objects and Natural Materials

In our analysis of photos, there are numerous examples of young children who not only observe especially family activities that occur around them, but who also involve themselves directly and physically in these activities, what Rogoff (2014) calls “pitching in.” It is apparent from the narratives accompanying the photos that participation by the young ones is permitted, even encouraged, and perhaps at times expected by the adults and older children. Preschool children’s involvement takes various forms, occurs in a variety of settings, may be accompanied by diverse persons, and incorporates the use of a variety of materials. The little ones actively participate in mundane tasks and cultural celebrations within their homes: they help clean the family garden and cornfield, they participate in fiesta preparations, they sweep the house, water plants, help plant seedlings. In these tasks, they employ a variety of objects and materials, such as natural materials (soil, corncobs), common utensils (broom, empty yogurt containers, cup, box), animals (donkey), cultural materials (figures in a Christmas manger scene) and very few commercial toys (ball, rattle, doll).

After carefully studying and organizing the photos submitted in all 28 portfolios, we propose that the children in their activities display a *trajectory of informal active learning*, involving three distinct types or moments of learning in action. There appear to be two initial types of imitated activity: the first, imitation by the child in the moment and in the presence of the imitated action; the second, imitation at a later time, in a new context, without the presence of the imitated action.

The following example displays the first type or moment of imitated activity on our *trajectory of informal active learning*. In

virtually all the Type 1 photos, the little ones imitated family members’ or acquaintances’ actions in order to “pitch in” and collaborate on everyday chores. Here Galdina Santiago Pérez describes a visit the Initial Education children made to a home in their Mixtec community of Nuevo Tenochtlán, Putla Villa de Guerrero: “*We visited a mother who was stripping kernels off corncobs when we arrived. With great confidence, the children joined in with her, stripping the cobs of their kernels.*”

Type 2 imitated actions are those reproduced at a later time and in a new setting, without the immediate presence of the action previously imitated. These independent actions apparently result when children have observed and imitated the same action so often as it is being modeled in their presence that now, in a new setting and without a visible model, they remember how to carry out the action by themselves, and appear to feel a desire or responsibility to do so. This second type of imitation signals a significant learning leap, displaying the young child’s capacity to remember what had been modeled and imitated earlier and to reproduce it independently at a later time in a new setting. It also may indicate a nascent sense of “communal responsibility,” that is, the need and desire to take action on behalf of others, or the whole group. Hildeberta Martínez Vásquez, a Triqui teacher-researcher in the community of San Juan Teponaxtla, Putla Villa de Guerrero, documented this example of Type 2 imitation:

After everyone had left the classroom, Eleazar (2;5) noticed that the floor of the classroom was very dirty. Without anyone telling him to do so, he decided to grab the broom and sweep the floor. I asked his mother if he did that at home. She said yes, that they had to buy him a small broom, that everything his mother does he wants to do. I was surprised

because he collected all the trash. This made me realize the influence it has on children how they are taught at home and how they participate in household tasks.

In many photos, preschoolers were engaging independently in actions they had certainly observed countless times around them in their everyday settings and most likely had imitated alongside adult models previously and frequently. Often, as with Eleazar above, these were routine household tasks, though the preschoolers were also seen to weed the family's cornfield, water the garden, feed birds and chickens, and carry firewood.

The photos suggest that commonplace family and cultural tasks tended to be those infants chose to reproduce spontaneously, even in their self-selected "play." In one case, three-year old Yoemí imitated her mother symbolically in her play, carefully wrapping her doll following local tradition and singing her "baby" to sleep with lullabies. In another case discussed below, when their imaginary car needed repair, a two-year old and his preschool older brother accessed their father's professional tools to make the repair. The portfolios provide scarce evidence of infants' spontaneous activities that are technologically or imaginatively distant from their local "here and now."

It is clear that observation and imitation are pervasive in these children's learning. Still, in some photos and accompanying commentaries the teacher-researchers record very young children adding a new and creative twist to something previously learned, displaying another significant learning leap - the possibility that the children are self-initiating creative actions in response to immediate contextual situations. These examples of self-initiated creative actions became Type 3 on our *trajectory of informal active learning*. María Luz Monjaráz Alonzo documented a two-year-old taking responsibility to "shoo away" a hungry

intruder to her mother's garden in the Zapotec community of San Isidro, Cozoaltepec, Santa María Tonameca, Pochutla:

Little Leidi (2 years) encountered her dad's donkey roaming about nearby. Suddenly the donkey came over to eat the plants her mom had planted near the house. Since Leidi and her brother Edwin always water the plants in the morning, they take care of them and don't let the donkey eat them.

Learning through Direct, Physical Action, but Now Accompanied by Oral Dialogue with Someone Older, often an Adult

Some teacher-researchers included narrative evidence of what Vygotsky (1987) called the "zone of proximal development," that is, the difference between what the child can do for herself without help or guidance, and what she can do with support from the more advanced linguistic and cognitive skills of someone older ("scaffolding"). Often, but not always, the more mature person is an adult, such as the child's parent, uncle, aunt, or neighbor, someone with more knowledge who deepens the child's understanding by asking or answering questions. Triqui teacher-researcher Hildeberta Martínez Vásquez witnessed a bilingual conversation in San Juan Teponaxtla, Putla Villa de Guerrero, between Eleazar and his mother while the child swept the house. Here the mother instructs the child on how sweeping should be done and where to deposit the trash. (This is the same child described earlier as he spontaneously applied his much-practiced sweeping skills, unrequested, to clean his classroom floor):

When I arrived at the house of Eleazar (2;5), I found him sweeping. While he swept, he chatted with his mother in

Spanish. His mother spoke to him in Mixtec, saying that he should sweep from inside the house to the outside. And when he finishes, he should put the trash in its place.

Scaffolding is not always or only provided by adults. The portfolios included some examples of older siblings or peers offering linguistic and cognitive scaffolding to younger children. Triqui teacher-researcher Bicki Fernández Guadalupe admits to being “really surprised” by a play scene she witnessed between two siblings in the community of San Juan Teponaxtla, Putla Villa de Guerrero. Here the older brother scaffolded his two-year-old sibling in their shared symbolic play as they repaired their imaginary “car”:

Without letting him know, I observed little Isaí (2;4) in his home. He was playing with his five-year-old brother. What I could see is that they were playing at repairing their car. I noticed that from their father's tools – he's a taxi driver - they had grabbed a jack and cables. According to them, their car was in really bad shape. And what I could manage to hear is that the five-year-old said to Isaí, “Change the oil 'cause it's no good anymore.” Isaí responded, “Yes.” And they spent about half an hour playing. I was really surprised by what these little ones were doing.

It is notable that in most of these dialogic exchanges, the older persons, often the mothers, encourage the children's curiosity not by setting aside what they are doing to engage in child-focused play, but rather by entering into and extending dialogue about their mundane adult daily tasks, and in the process enrich the infant's language skills, cultural knowledge and awareness of their communal world. Rocío Aparicio Ortiz Miramar documents such a

mother-child dialogue in a coffee orchard, a setting that is at once familial, communal and commercial in her Mixtec community of Santa María Yucuhiti, Tlaxiaco:

Little Emely (2;6) is with her mother as she cuts coffee beans from the trees, an activity in the community that parents teach their children. The little girl is very interested and entertained in this activity. While they cut coffee beans, the mother chats with the little girl, and Emely asks her questions: “Why are the coffee beans red? Why don't we collect the green beans? Why is coffee sweet? Why don't we eat the beans?” among others.

How do these dialogic interactions differ from the activity scenes described previously in our description of the *trajectory of informal active learning*? Incorporating dialogue, these scenes illuminate the importance of the conversations that mothers and others who are older engage in with the preschoolers while together they participate in routine activities in their homes and communities. In most cases the activities themselves are similar or identical to those described earlier, consisting of everyday household or community activities involving ready-at-hand implements and tools, not child-specific toys. They differ only in that interaction and oral dialogue is engaged in with an older person.

Research Question #3: How can educators collaborate with community members so that “developmentally appropriate” Indigenous Initial Education is understood to prioritize and incorporate community practices of *comunalidad*?

Our third research question sought to investigate how educators and community members together might “communalize”

Indigenous Initial Education. If, as Maldonado (2002; 2004) has suggested, the pervasive sense of communal belonging and shared responsibility which surpasses individualism or family priorities in Oaxaca's Indigenous communities is instilled virtually from birth, how could Initial Education teacher-researchers observe, document and learn from this profound process of collective civic formation in order to nurture it in their own teaching practice, rather than seeking to standardize or Westernize the early education they provide?

Given the *diplomado's* transformative pedagogical purpose, the photos and commentaries analyzed above initially puzzled, even troubled, us as analysts: Why was it that the spontaneous activities of young children documented in these 28 separate Oaxacan Indigenous communities overwhelmingly captured preschoolers acting alone or in small groups, such as in pairs or with a few family members? In Oaxaca's Indigenous communities, individuals or families are sanctioned if they isolate themselves from others; all are expected to participate and contribute to the whole, according to their age, gender, and physical health. So why was broader collective, communal life not more evident in these photographic data?

In a few rare photos, only one of which is described here, communal life and young children's presence in it are readily apparent. In the Mixtec community of Guadalupe Llano de Avispa, Santiago Tilantongo, Nochixtlán, teacher-researcher Gabriela León Santos records a collaborative *tequio* task (cooking the hearts of agave plants, called magueys, to make the alcoholic drink, mezcal). Gabriela documents how the men of the community employ this communal event as a "teachable moment" for the children:

Everyone is gathered around a large oven where the ripe maguey hearts were

buried so they would cook. This is done every year during these months (March or April) because then it is taken out of the village to sell during the fiesta of Holy Week. This maguey, when cooked, can be chewed, it's a traditional sweet, and mezcal can also be extracted from it.

Here all the men help each other light the oven. Children from the elementary school also help carry the maguey hearts to the oven. The photo shows how the children observe the activities that occur in this process, everything that's being done. And they ask their dads how they do it. This is good because the fathers say that this is an activity that is a custom done every year and that it should not be forgotten, and it's better that we teach our children so that it will be preserved.

Before the maguey hearts are ready to be cooked, when they are green, young children don't get involved because the maguey has a very sweet juice that makes you itch if it splashes on your skin. In this activity pregnant women don't participate because it is said that if they help or if they stand next to the oven, they will give "the evil eye" and the maguey won't cook. It will stay a light coffee color, and when chewed it will make your mouth itch. The maguey stays in the oven for five days so that it is well cooked and delights people's taste buds.

Various elements of *comunalidad* are evident in Gabriela's commentary: i) there is communal knowledge and wisdom (what the teacher-researchers tend to call "beliefs and customs") that influence how community members of different genders and ages participate; ii) there may be certain risks involved in young children's participation in these communal activities, but rather than being

excluded, their participation is watched over and guided; iii) there are opportunities for little children, along with others, to observe, listen, participate, converse, and inquire, as well as possible limitations to their participation; iv) the community understands that its collective activities, together with oral commentaries that accompany them, are teaching something important that the children need to learn if communal life is to be sustained. Here we differ from other studies conducted in non-Western communities, where few examples are reported of oral, explicit communal “teachings” provided by adults to children (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff *et al.*, 2010).

The four analysts spent time conjecturing why so few photos of shared communal events like this appeared in the portfolios. It is highly likely that these *tequio* events occurred often in the communities, and that young children were present at them along with everyone else, as educating younger generations into communal *tequio* obligations is a priority. Together we hypothesized explanations: perhaps older children and adults at the scene who were more active and verbal (as in Gabriela’s description above) drew the teacher-researcher’s attention away from the less participatory preschoolers; or perhaps the teacher-researcher felt some discomfort in documenting community events involving adults and older children who might not grasp why their actions and utterances are receiving attention; or perhaps the teacher-researcher herself was too involved as a community member in the event to remember to document it. These, or others, could be possible explanations, but we will not know without further investigation.

However, careful reconsideration of our own analytic findings led us to see that our disappointment at the lack of photos of communal *tequio* events was likely cultural blindness on our part. Our findings clearly

document infants in these communities intently observing adult activities (e.g. a mother weaving; mothers cleaning the school patio; fathers harvesting fish to sell). Increasingly, these young infants “pitch in” to help accomplish many of these everyday tasks through guided, and then spontaneous, participation (e.g. stripping kernels off corncobs; sweeping the floor at home with guidance, then spontaneously in the classroom). At times the infants’ participation involves new, likely unrehearsed, actions in the moment to creatively problem-solve, often on behalf of others (e.g. shooing a hungry donkey away from Mom’s garden). And when there is dialogue with someone older, the talk tends to be about why and how the tasks of the family and community are best accomplished (e.g. repairing a car; harvesting coffee beans). Rarely did the portfolios offer evidence of infants playing with commercial toys; their symbolic play involved no princesses or superheroes, only cars to repair and baby dolls to swaddle and lull to sleep with traditional lullabies; there was no evidence here of planned parental play or video games.

In the end, with transformed communal eyes, we saw that these developmental changes in infant participation and “pitching in” on family and community tasks most likely are moment-by-moment instances of the pervasive, incremental process of civic formation toward communal belonging and shared responsibility that begins in Oaxacan Indigenous communities “virtually from birth.” The familial scenes documented by the teacher-researchers of infant participation in mundane tasks were themselves evidence of the intimate, unremarkable, taken-for-granted process whereby infants were learning *comunalidad* through participation in acts of communal concern and responsibility toward others.

Discussion: "Communalizing" Developmentally-Appropriate ECEC

In December 2014, Plan Piloto-CMPIO organized a gathering of the *diplomado* participants, their educational supervisors, and newly hired early childhood educators in their schools. One purpose of this gathering was to share our analysis of young children's spontaneous activities and our proposed *trajectory of informal active learning*, and to request feedback. One revelatory reflection displays the tremendous chasm between communal practices and informal learning processes, on the one hand, and formal, teacher-planned "school reform" mindsets, on the other: "I don't take into account the activities that the children do in their homes and in the community; what matters to me are the activities that I want to implement with the children."

We acknowledged to the group our surprise that few of the teacher-researchers included in their narratives rich details about dialogue and language use that likely occurred in the scenes they photographed. One of Plan Piloto-CMPIO's goals in organizing the *diplomado* had been to prepare these novice early educators with skills needed to provide quality bilingual education, and to this end continuous attention was given to strategies such as dialogic scaffolding for strengthening or revitalizing the Indigenous language of the community. The three examples included earlier of dialogic interactions between little ones and their mothers or siblings, dialogues that can be seen to scaffold these young learners in important linguistic and cognitive ways, were among few such examples in the portfolios. When exposed to these samples and our findings at the gathering, one teacher-researcher commented, "I have paid very little attention to

the chats that mothers have with their little ones and to their importance in the children's learning." We suspect that such dialogues do occur in the communities, even if few were documented in the portfolios, but this requires further documentation.

A final teacher-researcher reflection is shared here: "This analysis of the spontaneous and communal activities of little ones in our communities makes me ask myself: How should this information impact my teaching work with these children?" In essence, this is a personalized recasting of our third research question: How can educators collaborate with community members to transform Indigenous Initial Education, so that "developmentally-appropriate" ECEC is understood to incorporate and prioritize local practices through which communities socialize young children into *comunalidad*?

The portfolios evidence some advances in Plan Piloto-CMPIO's efforts to "communalize" Indigenous Initial Education in Oaxaca, in some communities if not in all. Perhaps most significantly, consciousness about the importance and possibilities of community-appropriate ECEC has been raised, and specific local efforts by some *diplomado* participants have been implemented and defended, despite intense negative pressures on two fronts: imported culture-bound Western perspectives of "developmentally-appropriate practices" prioritizing play and planned adult interventions, and Mexican standardized, federally imposed school reforms. Whatever continuing questions remain, like Tobin (2005) and Rogoff (2003), these teacher-researchers now recognize that they have the right and communal obligation to augment rather than supplant the important funds of knowledge and learning the children acquire spontaneously and informally in their Indigenous communal contexts. Facing continued government

repression but fortified by civic, CNTE and Plan Piloto-CMPIO support, their goal remains to construct together with parents and communities a transformed Initial Education based in Indigenous *comunalidad*. Now more than ever they understand that nothing less is required if their communities' languages, communal lives, and human and Indigenous rights are to be honored and defended.

Notes

1. Available on datos.cipaz.org, 8 February 2010, as cited in "Plan para la Transformación de la Educación de Oaxaca (PTEO)," State Institute of Public Education of Oaxaca (IEEPO) and Section 22 SNTE/CNTE, Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, January 2012, p. 7.
2. Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado, public presentation, Albuquerque NM, June 2015.
3. Plan Piloto-CMPIO has three institutional "faces": (i) since 1978, it serves as a statewide public school district, known as Plan Piloto, part of the system of Indigenous Education of the State Institute of Public Education of Oaxaca (IEEPO), with about 1400 Indigenous teachers in more than 450 rural bilingual schools throughout the state; (ii) in 1982, it was recognized as Local D-1-211 of Oaxaca's Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), and a key leader in the dissident National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE); and (iii) in 1990, it legally incorporated as a civil association (AC).
4. A *diplomado* in Mexico is an officially accredited academic experience devised to address a specific educational need.
5. Unidad de Normatividad y Política Educativa. (2015). *Política Nacional de Evaluación de la Educación: Documento rector*. November, 2015.
6. Mayem Arellanes Cano, lawyer in the Legal Department of Sección 22, in a public presentation in Albuquerque, NM, November 2016.
7. Mayem Arellanes Cano, lawyer in the Legal Department of Sección 22, in a public presentation in Albuquerque, NM, November 2016.
8. Personal communication, January 4, 2017.
9. This analysis of photographs and narratives, conducted collectively by three members of the Pedagogical Committee of Plan Piloto-CMPIO and this author, has been reported previously in a Spanish language anthropological publication in Peru (Jiménez, Martínez, Mendoza & Meyer, 2015). The present article, the first to report this work in English, draws on the earlier analysis while adapting and updating the previously published article.

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