

Serving Mixtec Students in Washington Schools

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Who Are the Mixtec?

Mixtec people are one of the largest native groups in Mexico, occupying the Western half of Oaxaca and small parts of Guerrero and Puebla. They migrate to other parts of Mexico, but also migrate to states like Washington, California, Texas, Florida and New York. New York has approximately 25-35,000 Mixtec speakers (Velasco, 2014), while 20,000 Mixtec in Ventura County CA. Mixtec people come from a unique and rich culture which is often labeled as “Mexican” but most do not speak Spanish and only know the Mixteco language. Since Mixtec people have traditionally practiced agriculture, when they move to the United States, many transition straight into agricultural work as well. Mixtecs in the United States are often culturally and linguistically isolated because of the language barrier. Since many only speak their native language, they may face discrimination, poverty and exploitation.



Characteristics of the Mixtec Language

Geyman et al. (2012) noted that there are many dialects of the Mixteco language with the most common being *Mixteco Alto* (high *Mixteco*) and *Mixteco Bajo* (low *Mixteco*). The names refer to the altitude of the mountains in which the Mixteco villages are located. Geyman et al. estimated that the vast majority of Mixtecos in Washington speak *Mixteco Alto*.

How Many Mixtec Students Live in WA State?

Students from Mixtec cultural groups are present in a number of school districts in Washington state. Geyman et al. (2012) estimated that in 2012 approximately 5,500 Mixteco lived in Washington with most settled in agricultural towns. The largest community of Mixtecos was in the Mount Vernon-Burlington area with approximately 2,000 individuals. In Central Washington, the Othello school district has students who speak the Mixtec language while living in a community where both English and Spanish is spoken frequently. These students may be classified as “Hispanic” and although their families may have immigrated from Mexico, they are unique in that they may not be fluent in Spanish because their family and early oral language experiences may be in the Mixtec language.

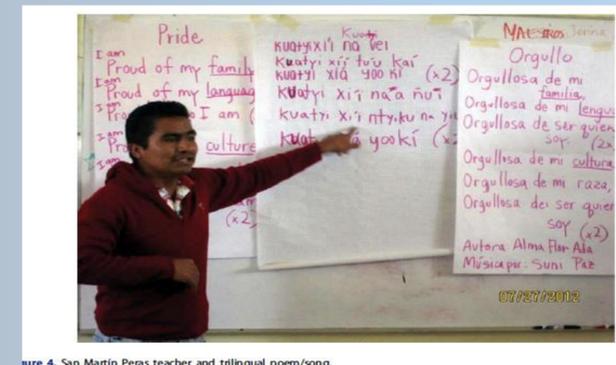


Figure 4. San Martin Peras teacher and trilingual poem/song.

Academic and Social Challenges of Students from Mixtec Backgrounds

Students from Mixtec backgrounds who are recent immigrants may face a variety of unique challenges in schools. For example, Mixteco students who live in communities with a high number of Spanish speaking classmates may face having to learn both English and Spanish to communicate with classmates and teachers. Also, because students have a Mexican background, some may assume that they are Spanish speakers, when in fact they may have little experience with Spanish. Mixteco students may also face social challenges. Barillas-Chon (2010) studied the experiences of four immigrant high school students from Oaxaca. Two spoke both Zapoteco and Mixteco and preferred these languages over Spanish. Another student’s primary language was Mixteco, but they were learning Spanish and English at the same time during this period. The last student only spoke Spanish. These students reported experiencing racism and discrimination because of their language, their lack of education, and their physical appearance. They reported being mocked for speaking their native language and also for not being able to speak Spanish fluently.

Mixtec Students in Schools in Mexico

Racism in Mexico and in its school settings may not be noticeable because some may assume that everyone is considered to “look” the same (Escalon & Castellanos, 2016). However, “invisible racism” may exist, particularly for students who have different features or who come from indigenous backgrounds. A study done by SPINNA, an organization that works on prevention of racism and discrimination in Mexican school settings, surveyed students to see what traits they considered to put someone at a higher risk of facing discrimination. Forty-six percent of the students indicated that the color of someone’s skin influenced how likely they were to be bullied by other peers. While 24% indicated that having a disability is what made you more prone to being bullied. Only 16% said that coming from an indigenous background, such as being mestizo, would increase someone’s likelihood of being physically and verbally insulted by other peers (Televisa, 2017).

Recommendations for Educators

- *Early intervention programs, especially dual-language programs, have been received well by parents. Velasco (2014) studied the engagement of parents in a dual-language (Spanish-English) Head Start and found that parents - many who had limited educational experiences - responded well to the program.
- *Educators should consider strategies to improve school-family communication for Mixteco/Indigenous families.
- *Velasco (2014) reported the high drop out rate of Mixteco students in New York. Interventions focused on the unique needs of Mixteco students may be helpful, especially considering the language and possible social difficulties such as bullying (Barillas-Chon, 2010).
- *A program that was implemented in California (Transnational Teacher Education Program) focused on how to create interconnectedness between teachers and students (Ruiz, Baird & Hernandez, 2016). The program was effective in increasing the understanding of and interconnectedness with Mexican indigenous students.

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