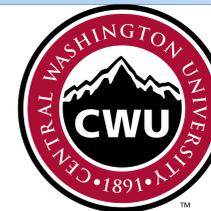


# Providing School Psychological Services to Mixteco Students

Heath Marrs, Ed.D., Maritza Lazcano, B.S., Jasmin Moreno Sanchez, B.S., Yecenia Ramirez, B.S.  
Central Washington University



## 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. In 2012 Geyman et al. estimated there were approximately 5,500 Mixtecos in Washington state, mostly in agricultural towns. 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*.

## Basics of Mixtec Language (Kickbush & Kirkness, 2016)

- Mixtec is an ancient language, unrelated to Spanish, dating back to pre-Columbian times.
- There are anywhere from 30-50 variations of the language, some differing greatly from each other.
- Mixtec is mainly spoken in the Oaxaca region of Mexico, a very mountainous and isolated area.
- It is one of eight branches in the Otomanguan language family.
- It has a Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) structure, which is a structure that accounts for only 9% of world's languages.
- Mixtec is a tonal language partially relying on how a word is pronounced to convey meaning.
- It uses repetition of words to take on different meanings (for emphasis, repeating 'slow slow' to mean 'very slow').
- It does not have a past or perfect tense.
- It is an analytic language that conveys meaning through free instead of bound morphemes.

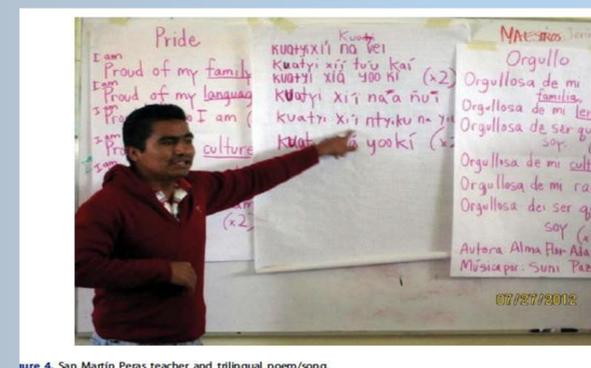


Figure 4. San Martin Peras teacher and trilingual poem/song.

## 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.

## 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).

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