

Historical study can bridge gap among schools, indigenous students, researcher says

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As migrants from more than 60 indigenous groups in Mexico have [increasingly come to the United States](#) in recent years, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists have sought how to understand their cultures as they continue to enter American classrooms.

A University of Kansas researcher of Mexican-U.S. history said in addition to the frequent language barrier, there are often radical cultural differences that American educators could better understand via a historical analysis of how Mesoamerican children typically learn and are socialized.

"In the case of [indigenous communities](#) in Mexico the entire way of arranging a culture doesn't always include the public school. All of a sudden they find themselves at a [public school](#) here in the United States, but it's not an institution that is usual to the community in the way that we typically understand it," said Ruben Flores, associate professor of American studies. "You've got to find a way to translate their cultural practices to our cultural practices, and vice versa, and that's a much more difficult enterprise."

Flores was the lead author of "Using History to Analyze the 'Learning by Observing and Pitching In' Practices of Contemporary Mesoamerican Societies," published in December in the journal *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* as part of a National Science Foundation-funded project designed by psychologist Barbara Rogoff at the University of California, Santa Cruz, to understand Mesoamerican

[learning](#) practices. The special issue was devoted to the study of the learning practices that Rogoff and others have coined "Learning by Observing and Pitching In," or LOPI, which is especially common among indigenous communities of the Americas and families that have had contact with those communities.

Flores said these learning practice differs from the more formalized learning models common in Western schooling where nearly all students are expected to learn the same way following instruction from the teacher. However, LOPI involves a repetition of behaviors that often takes place in family homes where children watch very carefully what parents are doing and then repeat it. Very few, if any words, are spoken, which is often the opposite of instruction in the classroom based on lectures.

"Over the course of time there are questions of spirituality, morality and one's place in the community are being answered and being understood by the children, even if there's not necessarily any kind of verbal communication that's happening all the time," Flores said. "Socialization and learning in these indigenous communities often takes place not through verbal communication but through children watching their parents very carefully, very minutely throughout the conduct of the day and repeating the behavior."

"Pitching in" references voluntarily helping with the labor of the day.

"When one repeats that, then one is picking up the values of the community because it's inflected with the hierarchy and the ethics of the community," Flores said.

Many indigenous Mexican families have migrated to the United States particularly in the West in recent years, as they seek relief from economic and political conditions at home.

"They recognize that entering the stream of institutions in the U.S. is better for the bottom line economically of the family. And that it's better for them as they consider remaining in the country, going on to college for instance and joining the work force," Flores said.

There is often frustration in the beginning when children enter American schools because the usual learning model is unknown and there can be cultural conflicts among groups meeting each other for the first time, he said. However, with recent emphasis on improving academic performance of all students, schools also have a vested interest in modifying their understanding of how indigenous students learn, he said.

"From both the side of the families and from the side of the school officials, LOPI researchers have wondered whether it is possible to translate across the differences more tightly," Flores said. "That requires a lot of thought because it's not automatic."

His group's journal article includes three case studies of indigenous communities in Mexico—the Nahua people of the state of Puebla, the P'urhépecha communities of the state of Michoacán and the Nahua people of the Texcoco area—where an understanding of historical patterns have proven fruitful for understanding the contemporary LOPI practices.

"I was asked to help articulate the differences that historical analysis could make to an understanding of contemporary LOPI practices," Flores said. "So how does one interpret those? That's not an easy thing to do. Social scientists and humanists have helped to expand our understanding of these communities by considering the ways that they have structured their lives over very long durations. It's not something that's happened overnight."

He said there is a experimental models in California, especially the Los

Angeles area, on LOPI in the classroom, but several challenges remain for the practice, including the influence of austerity politics and states' declining to increase investment in public education.

"Another of the things that we may be learning from these communities is how the practice and experience that are intrinsic to their socialization practices reinforces what we call 'education,'" Flores said. "We could be learning from them rather than they just learning from us."

More information: Rubén Flores, Luis Urrieta Jr., Marie-Noëlle Chamoux, David Lorente Fernández, Angélica López, Chapter Fifteen - Using History to Analyze the Learning by Observing and Pitching In Practices of Contemporary Mesoamerican Societies, In: Maricela Correa-Chávez, Rebeca Mejía-Arauz and Barbara Rogoff, Editor(s), *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, JAI, 2015, Volume 49, Pages 315-340, ISSN 0065-2407, ISBN 9780128031216, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2015.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2015.09.005)

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