10-1-2015

Evaluations in Mexico: Institutionalizing the Silence of Indigenous Populations

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Abstract

This paper frames the role of national assessments in Mexico from the sociology of absences perspective, where the marginalized are actively produced as non-existent. The ENLACE (now PLANEA), as the most publicized Mexican assessment, is analyzed in order to understand how education mechanisms systematically omit the voices and languages of minoritized populations. Using governmental policies and documents, this paper argues that Indigenous children in basic education are intentionally caught in a cycle of assessment inequalities by the institutionalization of one-language, one-culture assessment tools. Overall, the paper advocates for the design of just assessment tools that have clear pedagogical intentions and that can allow the voices of Indigenous children to be heard. A deeper understanding of how the ENLACE is one small yet important fragment of the unequal education system in Mexico could help other institutions in Latin America to revise and revisit their own national assessment tools and consider innovative ways to help Indigenous populations' voices to be heard.

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From a modernization perspective, development is a process that countries follow in order to be part of the economic market. In this perspective, countries in an economically disadvantaged position should follow the fiscal, educational, and social policies that have been implemented in high-income countries to become part of the competitive world (Porter & Sheppard, 1998). Similar to many development buzzwords, *accountability* has become regular jargon in the educational development arena, especially with international educational institutions (Cornwall, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009) and has been locally adapted by the Mexican government as more transparent, by developing "more valid and neutral forms of evaluation in assessing educational quality" (Levinson, 2005, p. 262).

In early 2013, Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico's current Head of State, launched a new education reform that introduced an independent, public, and autonomous evaluation organism, the National Institute of Education Evaluation (INEE by its acronym in Spanish). This institute has the mandate to assess students' learning outcomes through different means, one of them being the National Academic Achievement Assessment for Schools (ENLACE by its acronym in Spanish). This assessment has been the object of controversies and debates since being linked to teacher salaries in contentious ways, as well as not being considered a reliable tool to measure children's knowledge (Díaz, 2009; INEE, 2014b).

One of the first actions taken by the INEE was to stop the application of the ENLACE during the 2013–2014 school year, revise it, and launch it as a new

assessment tool during the 2014–2015 school year. The result of this revision is the National Plan for the Assessment of Learnings (PLANEA by its acronym in Spanish). PLANEA, which substituted the ENLACE, is a compound of exams designed by the Secretariat of Public Education and the INEE (SEP, 2015a). PLANEA was applied in June 2015 and its results were recently published in August 2015. The ENLACE affected students and teachers in all school levels, with a particularly heavy impact on the most marginalized and often Indigenous populations (Coll, 2009).[1] Hence, reviewing how official assessments in Mexico have been further institutionalizing this marginalization is a relevant issue to study and the focus of this paper.

Taking Sousa Santos' (2009) sociology of absences as my main theoretical lens, I will first succinctly describe it and then explain how I relate it to the Mexican assessment arena. Then I will map out the context in which Indigenous populations live in Mexico, the inequality challenges they face and the government's efforts to include them in the country's educational agenda. Afterwards, I will give an account of the main student assessments that are held in Mexico, with a special emphasis on the ENLACE and its impact on Indigenous children. In the last section I offer some final remarks where I use the sociology of absences lens to reflect on how the ENLACE, and now PLANEA, are part of the bureaucratic education system that can either keep on perpetuating the inequalities faced by Indigenous education or can help to identify and act upon these inequalities. Unless intentional changes are made, the institutionalization of laissez-faire policies will continue to have a negative impact on all children, especially Indigenous ones.

Towards a Sociology of Absences

The sociology of absences understands knowledge as a compendium of possibilities, where the recognition of the silenced is of extreme importance (Sousa Santos, 2009). According to Sousa Santos, the sociology of absences refers to how

> what is seen as not existing has been actively produced as non-existent…
> it has been made absent by being suppressed, discredited, disqualified,
> marginalized, in sum, by being outside epistemological and social mono-
> cultures, such as the monoculture of knowledge, social classification,
> conceptions of time, dominant scales and productivity. [This] comprise[s]
> a gigantic mode of production of silences, unpronounceabilities and ab-
> sences, mostly in the south. (as cited in Dalea & Robertson, 2004, pp.
> 158–159)

From this perspective, there is an understanding that social experiences in the world are diverse and ample, rather than just what is reported in documents through dominant languages, or what traditional and conventional science measures considers important. From this stance, there are realities that are neither understood nor recovered by the instruments institutions use, and therefore keep on reproducing the silence of many groups, wasting the richness of their cultures and perspectives (Sousa Santos, 2009).

[1] In this paper I am adopting INEE's and the Mexican National Constitution definition on Indigenous populations: someone who speaks an Indigenous language, descendants of Indigenous populations, personal acknowledgement of being Indigenous or pertaining to an Indigenous community (Andrade, 2013; INEE, 2013a).

Using Sousa Santos' lens as my main one, I argue that evaluations pertaining to Indigenous education in Mexico are a mechanism that perpetuates discourses that push out Indigenous languages, a byproduct of historical processes (Hamel, 2008a). A discourse that is covertly perpetuated by these evaluations is that Spanish will eventually help Indigenous people mainstream into Mexican society, and if not promoted, Indigenous people will be further marginalized (Borja-Vega, Lunde & García Moreno, 2007; García-Moreno & Patrinos, 2011). This discourse rests on the idea that language alone, and not a historical process, is the only factor that explains the present inequalities of Indigenous children. From this point of view, the need for evaluating Indigenous children in the language with the most linguistic capital, Spanish, makes sense. Also, even though the State has the obligation to create conditions for the use of different languages in Mexico, no public school has been entitled to modify their syllabus, even less to make decisions on their assessments (Hamel, 2008a; for exceptions see Hamel, 2010, 2013; Schmelkes, 2013). Finally, one prevalent discourse is the "consciously or unconsciously… continuing colonial relationship with Indigenous people" (Despagne, 2010, p. 66), and the language in which the assessments are presented to Indigenous children, Spanish, is one of the many examples in which this relationship is enacted.

Five hundred years have passed since the Spaniards arrived in Mexico and implemented policies where Spanish was the only language of communication, relegating other languages and their speakers to inferior roles (Heath, 1972; some exceptions are described in Hamel, 2008b). These practices are still present in Mexico and the formal education contexts are prime examples of institutions that reproduce this linguistic inequality through different mechanisms. In this paper, I offer an illustration of this inequality, which is highlighted by the ways the ENLACE invisibilizes, silences, and minoritizes Indigenous children.

The Interplay of Inequality and Education in Mexico

In Mexico, 52.3 percent of the Mexican population lives under the poverty line, 72.3 percent being Indigenous peoples in rural populations (INEGI, 2013; UNESCO, 2010; World Bank, 2013). The United Nations Development Program (2013) calculates that, in terms of multidimensional poverty,[2] education contributes with 38.6 percent, health with 23.9 percent, and living standards with 37.5 percent, making education an important element in Mexico's poverty picture. Monetary incentives initiatives (e.g., conditional cash transfers programs such as Prospera) have taken place in order to close the educational gap, and offer access to a quality education to Indigenous children (SEDESOL, 2014). However, institutional discrimination is still visible in the budget that is allotted for the programs that are in charge of Indigenous education (Bigot, 2010; Muñoz, 2010). Not surprisingly, the budget and the access to school are not the only inequalities these groups suffer.

The government has recognized that one of the guiding forces of the inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations is the school asymmetry that exists in the education system, which is a monocultural, hegemonic, and monolingual one (CGEIB, 2008). In this line, programs that include the use of the mother tongue of Indigenous populations as medium of

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[2] The Multidimensional Poverty Index identifies deprivations in the same households in education, health and standard of living (UNDP, 2013).

instruction have been developed by the National Council of Education Promotion (CONAFE by its acronym in Spanish) and the General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education (CGEIB by its acronym in Spanish), successfully narrowing the gap in primary school mathematics scores (see Vegas & Petrow, 2008). Notably, they have not had the same results for Spanish learning.

In the following section, I will describe some of the most important institutions, programs, and policies that cater to the Indigenous populations and have an impact in their formal education. Mexican governments, when compared to other Latin American countries, have been characterized by the rush for the creation of programs and institutions (Hamel, 2001), thus there is an extensive bureaucratic apparatus. The following section describes an example of that bureaucracy.

Indigenous Education in Mexico: Policies, Programs, and Institutions

Mexico has more than 7 million Indigenous people, representing more than 6 percent of the total population as of the year 2010.[3] According to the government's data, 12.8 percent of the total population between 6 and 14 years old do not attend school, and almost all of them are Indigenous (López et al., 2011). In the case of Indigenous children who attend school, 92.1 percent complete primary education, 82.7 percent complete lower secondary, and just 36.3 percent complete upper secondary education (INEGI, 2009). All in all, not even one percent of the Indigenous population that accesses primary education attends university (Muñoz, 2010).[4] Even though school is seen as a means for social and economic mobility for many Indigenous groups, for others, school is seen as an institution that could damage ancestral and traditional practices, which justifies not sending their children to formal schooling (Taracena & Bertely, 1997; Torres, 2014). For Indigenous groups, becoming part of Mexican education thus means complying with the specific state and national curricula, including the ENLACE (López et al., 2011).

During the last decades there have been specific policies, programs, and institutions that have been tailored to attend the needs of these minoritized groups. One of these institutions is the CONAFE, which is in charge of serving the poorest children, as well as the ones in the most remote regions of the country in order for them to have equal access to education (López, 2008). Most of the students that are part of CONAFE's programs are Indigenous or of Indigenous origin (Muñoz, 2010).

In order to serve these children, the CONAFE sponsors community members who speak Indigenous languages to teach at the initial education, preschool, primary, and middle school levels in their communities (CONAFE, 2013; Muñoz, 2010). These community instructors have increased access to education for these communities, yet it is relevant to point out that these instructors are not trained teachers, but community members that have at least finished secondary education; hence the quality of education that these communities receive cannot be assured or compared to the one that urban populations are receiving (UNESCO, 2010). In the words of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in Mexico "the poorest are still receiving the poorest education" (Muñoz, 2010, p. 17).

The challenge of poorly trained teachers is just one of many that these Indigenous communities face in the school system. While the lack of professionally

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[3] 2010 was the year when the last population census was done (INEGI, 2010).

[4] The national ratio was 17 percent in 2010.

and constantly trained teachers might not physically push them out of school, it systematically pushes them out of quality and contextualized education practices (CGEIB, 2008; Hamel, 2001; 2008a). Another example of this systematic push-out has been recognized in the current Education Sector Plan (PSE by its acronym in Spanish), which states that the curriculum is overloaded by contents that are neither relevant nor contextualized to all the populations (i.e., Indigenous and rural), and includes school materials that need to be revised by the appropriate institutions (e.g. CONAFE) (SEP, 2013b). In addition, Hamel (2001; 2008a) has highlighted scenarios that consistently and systematically push Indigenous children out of their own culture and languages, and place them in a linguistically unequal position: (a) the official Indigenous language textbooks are rarely used alongside the Spanish textbooks; (b) the Indigenous language textbooks are designed to teach the language based on Spanish learning models; (c) there are no proper teaching pedagogies for Indigenous languages as a first language and Spanish as a second language; (d) the Indigenous language is a subordinated language of instruction, used until the children become proficient in the use of Spanish for the rest of the instruction. Moreover, most of the places where Indigenous children take classes have poor infrastructure and inadequate spaces for teaching (e.g., no toilets, water shortage, lack of electricity). According to Duarte, Garguiulo and Moreno (2011) as well as Muñoz (2010), this lack of infrastructure affects the learning and performance measured by assessment tasks, a fact that has not been always recognized by educational authorities (Coll, 2009).

The PSE also states that intercultural and bilingual education needs to be fostered in all education levels for the populations that speak Indigenous languages (SEP, 2013b). Nonetheless, this is not a new statement, but one that has been present in the government's discourse and has not been successfully implemented (see Dietz & Mateos, 2011). It is also fair to say, and somewhat shocking, that it was not until 2001 that the Mexican Constitution recognized that the country was a pluricultural nation, sustained by Indigenous people, who had the right to preserve and enrich their languages (SEGOB, 2001). Hence, the constitutional efforts to implement an intercultural and bilingual education are quite recent (CGEIB, 2008).

As a result of this addendum to the constitution, the General Law for the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples (LGDLPI by its acronym in Spanish) was created. This law stated that the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI by its acronym in Spanish) needed to be established in order to promote, strengthen, and develop the Indigenous languages in all the political and administrative arenas in Mexico, including the education sector (INALI, 2015). The INALI started to operate in 2005, under the supervision of the Education Secretariat (SEP by its acronym in Spanish) and at the same time has been acting as the institution that makes sure that the LGDLPI is enacted properly by the SEP (INALI, 2011; López, 2008).

In regards to intercultural education, the CGEIB, created in 2001, is in charge of coordinating, promoting, evaluating, and mentoring the SEP in terms of equity, intercultural development, and social participation in its different programs, which span from research to the creation and evaluation of materials that promote interculturality (CGEIB, 2008, 2014). It also collaborates with the CONAFE and the INALI in order to establish the most pertinent education for all Indigenous populations. However, even though the CONAFE and the CGEIB have been working towards an introduction of intercultural and bilingual education across

all educational modalities, there is still a veiled persistence by the education system to perceive Indigenous languages as only a resource for learning Spanish.

Finally, two central institutions that are in charge of developing policies that impact Indigenous education are the General Office for Indigenous Education (DGEI by its acronym in Spanish) and the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Populations (CDI by its acronym in Spanish). The DGEI, a subsystem of the Basic Education Secretariat, is concerned with proposing, updating, and overseeing that the Indigenous education's pedagogical norms, contents, programs, methods, and assessments are relevant and contextualized for Indigenous populations, taking into account an intercultural and bilingual approach (Hamel, 2008b; SEP, 2014a).

The CDI, created in 2003, is a governmental autonomous institution in charge of consulting and evaluating all the government programs that address Indigenous matters, including education. It is a guiding institution in the creation of public policies that promote the development of the Indigenous populations, and it also supervises all institutions (public, private, national, or international) in safeguarding Indigenous populations through the enforcement of the LGDLPI, the Constitution, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples. Specifically in the education arena, the CDI promotes the betterment of educational quality, as well as the improvement of access to bilingual education in all the Indigenous regions (SEP, 2008). Table 1 is an attempt to depict an overview of the complexity of the bureaucracy that impacts Indigenous education in Mexico.

Indigenous populations undergo visible inequalities in: (a) the political sphere, with a lack of voice in the main political arenas; (b) their belief systems, by valuing them as objects of study rather than different ways of knowing (Smith, 1999); and (c) the social sphere, portrayed by the racism towards these groups and the lack of institutions that service them (CGEIB, 2008). Overall, there is an active way of producing Indigenous realities as non-existent, and therefore they are not taken into account (Sousa Santos, 2009). Institutions exist, but Indigenous peoples are not necessarily listened to.

The ENLACE, as the Mexican institutional assessment tool par excellence, is not an exception to the instruments that silenced the voices of many. For example, in 2008 a Nichte'el community school sued the Education Secretariat based on the premises of the ENLACE's linguistic discrimination, its lack of contextualization of the questions to Indigenous realities, and its perpetuation of a hegemonic Western curriculum (CONAPRED, 2011). Even though the ENLACE was not a language test per se, Spanish language was a test component and Spanish was also used as the only means for taking the exam. This resulted in *de facto* devaluing of any Indigenous language experience or expertise, resulting in a form of epistemic violence (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005) to all the children that did not write or read in Spanish. In the following section, the ENLACE is the focus of my analysis, taken up as a tool that silences the voice and languages of Indigenous children, and which impacted, at many levels, most education stakeholders in Mexico until 2013. Before that, I will briefly describe the Mexican assessment arena that Indigenous and non-Indigenous children encounter throughout their formal education.

Table 1
Overview of the Institutions that Impact Indigenous Education in Mexico

Institutions	National Council of Education Promotion (CONAFE)	General Office for Indigenous Education (DGEI)	General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education (CGEIB)	National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Populations (CDI)	National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI)
Established	1971	1978	2001	2003	2005
Main responsibilities	Serves the poorest children, as well as the ones in the most remote regions of the country with initial, preschool, primary, and secondary education	Proposes, updates, and oversees the relevancy of Indigenous education's pedagogical norms, contents, programs, methods, and assessments for the Indigenous populations	Coordinates, promotes, evaluates, and mentors the SEP in terms of equity, intercultural development, and social participation in its different programs	Consults and evaluates all the government programs that address Indigenous matters, including education	Oversees how Indigenous languages are respected in all political and administrative arenas in Mexico, including the education sector
Relevant aspects	Sponsors community members who speak Indigenous languages to teach initial education, preschool, primary, and secondary levels in their communities	Incorporates the changes and innovations of the plans and programs into Indigenous education, including the relevant assessment tools	Collaborates with CONAFE and the INALI in order to establish the most pertinent education for Indigenous populations	Supervises that Indigenous populations are safeguarded by the law (human rights, LGDLPI, Constitution)	Promotes the production of standardized grammars

Source: Self-compilation based on Cámara de Diputados, 2003; CGEIB, 2008; 2014; CONAFE, 2013; Hamel, 2008b; INALI, 2011; López, 2008; Muñoz, 2010; SEP, 2008; 2013b; 2014a

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Mexico's Assessment Arena: The Case of ENLACE

Across the world, evaluation mechanisms have been established for almost all education stakeholders, from students in preprimary schools up to the principals, supervisors, and even in some cases indirectly evaluating parents by their participation in their children's education (Schiefelbein & Schiefelbein, 2003). Evaluations have become one of the main realms for investment in education at national and international levels. Even so, institutions have been created to evaluate the effect of education inputs and outputs (Cohen, 2010). In some cases, multilateral institutions, like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have made specific recommendations to countries to create autonomous institutes that are exclusively devoted to the processes of evaluation at all levels (Santiago, McGregor, Nusche, Ravela, & Toledo, 2012).

In the case of Mexico, the National Institute for Educational Assessment and Evaluation (INEE by its acronym in Spanish) has been transformed into an independent, public, and technically autonomous organism whose main activities include generating guidelines and evaluations, disseminating them, and processing their results in order to improve the quality of the Mexican education system (INEE, 2013b). Since the education reform approved in early 2013, the INEE has the faculty to assess students' learning outcomes in public and private institutions, as well as evaluate the performance of pre-service and in-service teachers.

In terms of national assessments, the ENLACE and the Education Quality and Attainment Assessment (EXCALE by its acronym in Spanish) were applied to primary and secondary education respectively, while the IDANIS has been recently implemented for students in transition from primary to lower secondary (SEP, 2011). The Program of International Student Assessments (PISA) applied by the OECD, and the Second and Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Studies (SERCE & TERCE) applied by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE/UNESCO) are also implemented in Mexico (SEP, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Table 2 summarizes the main differences amongst these assessments in Mexico.[5]

These standardized tests, following their own sampling methods, target children from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds, as well as from rural and urban areas. We could say that they are democratic since they are assessments for all, though they are not adapted for all. The ENLACE was implemented from 2006 to 2013 and the results for each student and school are available through the SEP. According to the results from 2006 to 2013, CONAFE and Indigenous schools respectively have 78.8 and 65.9 percent of their primary students in insufficient and elemental achievement levels in mathematics, whilst the national average is 51.2 percent, nothing to be proud of either (SEP, 2013c).[6] In Spanish, a language in which not all the Indigenous children are proficient,

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[5] PLANEA's information in the table describes the general panorama of what this compound of tests comprises. A comprehensive explanation on each test can be found in INEE (2015).

[6] Achievement levels definitions: (a) insufficient: needs to acquire and develop the assessed subject skills and knowledge; (b) elemental: requires to strengthen the majority of the knowledge on the subject and develop the required skills; (c) good: shows an adequate performance level of the assessed subject contents and skills; (d) excellent: possesses a high performance level of the assessed subject contents and skills (SEP, 2013c).

Table 2
National and International Learning Outcomes Assessments

Examination	PISA	SERCE & TERCE	IDANIS	EXCALE	ENLACE	PLANEA
Range	International	International (also applied in the state of Nuevo Leon)	National	National	National	National
Responsible institutions	OECD	UNESCO	SEP	INEE	SEP	INEE & SEP
Frequency	Every 3 years	SERCE results were published in 2006; TERCE results were published in 2015	Every year	Every 4 years until 2013 (ceased and substituted by PLANEA)	Every year until 2013 (ceased and substituted by PLANEA)	Every year (censual and sample modalities)
Assessed population	15-year-olds	3rd and 6th grade in primary education	Students in transition from primary to lower secondary	Applied in a rotatory mode starting in 3rd grade of preschool; 3rd to 6th grade in primary, and 3rd grade in lower secondary	Censual: 3rd to 6th grade in primary; 1st to 3rd grade in lower secondary and last year of upper secondary	Censual: 4th grade; Sample: 3rd grade of preschool, 6th grade of primary school, 3rd grade of lower secondary, and last year of upper secondary
Assessed areas	Measures life skills in mathematics, literacy, and science	Measures achievement in mathematics and language	Diagnoses basic skills for learning. It is neither a knowledge nor achievement test	Measures the educational system achievement in mathematics, Spanish language, social studies, and science	Diagnoses the achievement of each student, school, municipality, and state in mathematics, Spanish language, and an additional subject that changes every year	Assesses the knowledge and skills related to mathematics, language, and communication. Skills related to school climate are also assessed in 6th grade and 3rd grade of lower secondary. The censual test will also assess an additional subject that changes every year

Source: Self-compilation based on INEE, 2015; SEP, 2012; UNESCO, 2013; Vidal 2009

the performance levels are worrisome too since 87.5 and 77.4 percent of primary students in CONAFE and Indigenous schools respectively are ranked in the insufficient and elemental achievement levels, while the national average is 57.2 percent (SEP, 2013c).

Table 3 shows the percentage of students in the insufficient and elemental achievement levels in all the education modalities that exist in Mexico. Vast differences can be seen between them, especially between the private and general primary schools and the CONAFE and Indigenous ones. These results could be interpreted as children learning different things, learning in different ways, or not learning at all. It also raises questions about which epistemologies the test is validating and silencing, through which culture(s) education quality is being understood and, of course, which languages are legitimatized for learning and succeeding in formal education.

Table 3

Percentage of Primary Students in the Insufficient and Elemental Achievement Levels

	ENLACE 2013	
Education Modality	Spanish	Mathematics
CONAFE	87.5	78.8
Indigenous	77.4	65.9
General	58.3	51.8
Private	35.2	37.6
Total	57.2	51.2

Source: SEP, 2013c

Moreover, these results show that a one size fits all evaluation model might not be mirroring the differences between the populations, but instead may be exacerbating the inequalities that already exist in the country and could send misleading messages to the society in regards of the needs of certain social sectors (Coll, 2009). Based on these arguments, in 2014 the INEE focused on the validity of the ENLACE in terms of cultural relevance, assessed knowledge, implementation methods, technical validity, as well as the ways in which the results are used in the Mexican education. This was the first time there was an official evaluation of the ENLACE on behalf of the INEE (INEE, 2014b).

Besides this, the INEE and the UNICEF conducted a consultation during 2014 in 50 Indigenous communities in 31 languages in order to understand the current state of education in these communities and eventually design evaluations that capture the reality of these contexts (INEE, 2014a, 2014d). The results of this consultation were shared in December 2014. Some of the findings in this consultation were that Indigenous communities wanted the SEP to reduce subtractive bilingual practices, avoid institutional discrimination, eliminate unnecessary school contents and terminate repressive evaluations. The consulted Indigenous communities wanted their assessments to be done in their mother tongues, have the opportunity to be assessed with a diversity of tools, tests that could be written in an understandable language to them, and that education take into account children's previous knowledge, as well as what they learn in school (INEE, 2014e; 2014c). Overall there was a call for just assessments.

Of course, the assessments' previous results are also valuable, since they can give a picture of the education system and help to identify inequalities in a quantitative way (OEI, 2010). For instance, now there is institutionalized proof that education is not working in the same way for everyone. We know Indigenous children are not performing according to the standards set by the ENLACE. Also the results hint at how the poorest states are receiving the poorest education in terms of resources, quality of education, and access, and finally, they show how low exam results are repeatedly obtained by these populations (Coll, 2009; Muñoz, 2010; SEP, 2013b). These data can either be actively ignored by the institutions that collected them, or could ring a bell in the education political sphere. Unless we want to perpetuate the production of never-ending cycles of neglect of the rural, poor, and Indigenous regions, deliberate efforts need to be made.

ENLACE's Blind Spots

Mexico has 68 linguistic families, each one with different variants (Embriz & Zamora, 2012). The ENLACE, as a national examination, did not take into account this fact and denied the existence of voices other than Spanish (Bigot, 2010). Therefore, students who did not speak or write in Spanish were automatically prevented from successfully completing the examination. These arguments were further supported by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Inter-American Development Bank, which stated that the ENLACE was involuntarily reproducing inequity and strengthening inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, since it was not contextually appropriate, did not take into account Indigenous ways of knowing, and was a linguistic challenge (López, 2008).

In addition, this examination did not have any direct consequence on the students' academic path, though it impacted the classroom practices since many teachers taught to the test (Coll, 2009; Muñoz, 2010). This perverse effect is a common practice since public resource allocation, promotions, and professional development were conditioned to the students' performance in the ENLACE (Santiago et al., 2012; SEP, 2013a; SEP-SNTE, 2011). Furthermore, many teachers, in order to have better exam results and get the incentives, allowed the best performing children to take the exam, while denying it to the least performing, producing an absence of information in the Mexican evaluation panorama (Chuayfett, 2014).

Furthermore, Duarte et al. (2011) described that 40 percent of schools in basic education do not have libraries and 11 percent of them do not have any access to electricity. These facts are important since some questions in the ENLACE 2013 specifically referred to how libraries work in schools (3rd grade of primary exam), or how electric circuits work (1st grade of secondary) (SEP, 2014b), subtle but important aspects that affected students' performance. Questions that referred to ways of dressing, eating, or transportation means (e.g., subway), which are not culturally sensitive to minoritized populations in Mexico, were also included in the ENLACE.

How are these subtle differences expressed in the ENLACE results? As shown in Table 2, every year the ENLACE assessed mathematics, Spanish and an additional subject. For 2013, the additional subject was civics and ethics. According to the SEP (2014c), the former subject addresses the topics of citizenship, human rights, and democracy. Overall, they aim to help children learn about and value who they are. In 2013, the performance of the Indigenous students in these subjects was low;

81.68 percent of CONAFE students, and 71.89 of Indigenous school students ranked in the lowest levels, while the national average was 54.58 percent (SEP, 2013c). This information is interesting to reflect upon since the results are supposed to mirror the national attitudes and values that Mexican children should share; however, following Sousa Santos, the results are just a glance of the different ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous children think about what citizenship, human rights, and democracy mean for them. Overall, the exam exemplifies how these types of assessments are ideologically saturated (McCarty, 2002). In the case of Mexico, the ENLACE reinforced the idea of citizenship from the nation-state perspective, rather than one from the pluricultural and multilingual perspective that the Constitution supposedly supports and oversees through institutions such as the CDI.

Along these same lines, the Special Rapporteur for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on his mission to Mexico, reported that there needs to be an understanding that education quality cannot be improved through standardized tests such as the ENLACE, since they do not recognize the diversity in culture and languages (Muñoz, 2010). Ultimately, an understanding of assessments as windows for learning is needed, so they do not become mere censual instruments that continue marginalizing and stigmatizing populations. These premises have been recognized by the Education Secretariat but were not addressed in the successive ENLACEs, and it is yet to be seen if they were revisited in the newly launched PLANEA. At present, Mexico is crafting reforms, policies, institutions, and exams to reinforce old findings: the poorest education is offered to the poorest people, education is extremely bureaucratized, and assessment findings are difficult to communicate and implement in practice (Díaz, 2009; Muñoz, 2010). Moving from institutionalized tools that regurgitate needs, to institutionalized tools that recognize their limitations would be one of the first steps towards the visibility and emergence of marginalized voices.

Using Sousa Santos's sociology of absences perspective, now it is obvious and maybe redundant to say that the ENLACE was an institutionalized mechanism that reproduced inequalities and has been perverted by its uses, affecting children and the ways they learn. The ENLACE, as a small but powerful fragment of the Mexican education machinery, affected teacher salaries, the financial resources that schools received, as well as societal perceptions of public education. The aftermath of the second generation of the ENLACE, now PLANEA, which is officially not linked to any incentive programs and is just applied to the last grades of primary, secondary and high school, is yet to be seen.

Final Remarks: Institutionalizing Invisibility

The overall aim of the sociology of absences is to transform impossible objects into possible ones, in order to convert absences into presences (Sousa Santos, 2009) and offer a language of possibility (Smith, 1999). In the context of this paper, it would imply transforming assessments into learning tools that reflect the different Mexican educational contexts and support the voices of Indigenous children in formal education in order for them to be heard. In this tenor, I offer two final, though not determined, remarks on how this sociology can help us, if not solve, at least reflect on how such a popular national assessment tool has perpetuated, rather than transformed, the inequalities faced by Indigenous education.

1. The ENLACE highlighted the inequalities Indigenous children face every school day. ENLACE's results allowed us to see which are the least performing schools and correlate these results with aspects such as poor school and community infrastructure, lack of professional development, and poor student-teacher relationships (De Hoyos, Espino, & García, 2012). In Mexico, the access, existence, and quality of physical infrastructure in rural and Indigenous schools is related to the learning outcomes and students' achievement in primary education (Coll, 2013; Duarte et al., 2011). With the recent application of PLANEA, formerly ENLACE, there is hope that its results will be seen as a key to help schools improve their teaching and learning practices and their physical infrastructure. PLANEA, which follows a censual and sample application, will need to be used by the INEE and the SEP to identify the least performing schools and assist them in securing the basic infrastructure needed for teaching and learning.

Besides this, the government has amply recognized and showcased the PLANEA as a tool that will help to improve education in Mexico and as a first step for the design of pertinent pedagogical methods (SEP, 2015b). Which pertinent pedagogical methods, and pertinent for whom? We still do not know much about it. However, what we know is that this heavily publicized educational tool should be used as an example of inclusion rather than as a political showcase. There is still an uneven distribution of resources for Indigenous education and the programs and offices that serve these populations (Bigot, 2010). Moreover, this uneven distribution speaks to the historical, political, and economic processes that Indigenous people have been part of, as well as the value that the government has given to Spanish as a linguistic resource without thinking about the social, economical, and epistemological opportunities that the country is missing by not taking Indigenous populations and Indigenous languages into account. PLANEA will hopefully bring a new narrative; nonetheless, as of the moment when this paper went to press, neither the results for basic education, nor the strategies that the INEE and the SEP will follow, have been disseminated yet.

Unless the government makes sound efforts that go beyond the revision of assessments, the writing of policies, and the creation of bureaucratic institutes, the systematic reproduction of silences and absences will keep being the *modus vivendi* of Mexican education, a system moved by inertia rather than by intentions. The institutions in charge of Indigenous education need to start tackling inequality gaps expressed in the infrastructure differences between urban and rural schools, access to materials in the languages of the communities, and meaningful and updated professional development to teachers and administrators.

2. The government has strong institutional and bureaucratic paraphernalia to oversee the maintenance and development of Indigenous languages as well as the access to the Spanish language. The government has neither placed enough materials and teachers in the languages of Indigenous communities, nor modified the contents and languages of the assessments in order to tailor them to the needs of the different Indigenous communities it seeks to serve. As Hamel (2001) points out, it is necessary to think that language impacts all the curriculum spheres: written, taught, and assessed. Therefore, it is important to be aware that every time a language reform is proposed in Mexico we ask ourselves: Is it possible to acquire Spanish as a common language without excluding Indigenous mother tongues

from the main academic and cognitive educational arenas? Should Indigenous mother tongue languages work just as a means of assimilation in order to create a common education language (i.e., Spanish)? Which languages should be used for literacy and numeracy purposes? Are these going to be assessed in the common language (i.e. Spanish) or in the mother tongues? Is education in mother tongue languages a requirement for success in formal schooling or an obstacle? These and other questions need to be addressed not just in the written curriculum (e.g., language policy and planning), but also through the taught curriculum (e.g., teaching materials), and by the assessed one (e.g., PLANEA).

With these questions I do not want to state that by having a multilingual standardized assessment tool Mexico will become more democratic in its educational practices, start to respect minoritized populations, or think about the importance of language in its educational processes. Neither am I defending the position that one multilingual tool should be assessing the whole education spectrum of the education in Mexico. Bringing Indigenous languages to the forefront of assessment will bring its own challenges too. For example, which variant of an Indigenous language will be used in the assessment tool? Do we need to assess the Indigenous language knowledge or just the Indigenous language school knowledge? How would assessment look from an intercultural and bilingual stance? It is important to place the questions on the table and push assessment tools to not become bureaucratic obstacles that strengthen existing inequalities. As Haugen (1973, as cited in Hornberger, 2006) has argued, language itself is not a problem, but how languages are used to discriminate, marginalize, and leave out the voices of people through different mechanisms is a problem. Having assessments in Indigenous languages, without modifying the pedagogy or understanding Indigenous epistemologies, will just strengthen the governmental bureaucratic apparatus and might shrink the windows of opportunity for the voices of Indigenous children to be heard (McCarty, 2006; Smith, 1999).

Furthermore, assessments designed by Indigenous communities have already been developed in Mexico by P'urepecha and Maya schools (Hamel, 2013; Schmelkes, 2013). In the case of P'urepecha schools, their assessments have been designed by the community, applied in P'urepecha, Hñähñú, and Spanish, and have taken into account the scientific contents of the mainstream curriculum as well as the P'urepecha worldview (Hamel, 2010). Also, in the Yucatán Peninsula there has been a pilot program to create oral mathematics assessments that avoid Spanish and any type of standardized Mayan writing system (Schmelkes, 2013). Despite the fact that designing a tool for every school or designing oral assessments for each subject is institutionally challenging, the P'urepecha and the Maya cases are illustrations that tailored and culturally sensitive assessments are not inconceivable. Moreover, these are examples of how governmental institutions are neither the sole actors responsible for nor capable of designing and implementing assessment tools, but Indigenous communities themselves can come to terms on what they want to assess, how, and when (Smith, 1999). Sadly, moving the power loci from the institutions to the Indigenous communities and schools is far from reality in the current Mexican assessment panorama.

Conclusions

In his essay on Indigenous justices, Sousa Santos (2012) acknowledges that Indigenous justice does not just rely on technical issues. For example, the inclusion of Indigenous languages in the PLANEA would solve a very important technicality, but would not assure that the Indigenous children's voices are included (Ruíz, 1997). Indigenous justice is a political and attitudinal matter and, in our case, should not be reduced to having the Indigenous languages represented in the national assessments, but on the understanding that if children do not have the opportunity to comprehend the world through their epistemologies, and institutions continue *unpronouncing them*, justice is non-existent.

Bringing to the assessment conversation the languages of Indigenous people could help create spaces for an attitudinal change towards the role of Indigenous languages in Mexican education. A tool, such as PLANEA, will not by itself change the attitudes towards Indigenous languages and children; however, assessments can become windows of opportunity for change instead of displays of the institutionalization of silences. If the government and the INEE want PLANEA to be the so much desired set of tools that will improve Mexican education for everyone, they will need to understand that PLANEA will "need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different *subjectivities…*students bring to learning…and use these as a resource for learning" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 72, emphasis in original). PLANEA, although inoffensive in its nature, is part of the most pervasive education tools that create, recognize, and silence systemic inequities experienced by Indigenous children in Mexico. It is our responsibility to bring these issues to the fore and honor the call for just assessments where the voices of Indigenous children can be heard.

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