

Chapter 14

Experiences and Challenges of Indigenous Students in Higher Education During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes and analyzes the experiences of indigenous students of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are undergraduates of the bachelor's degree of elementary education who attend a public university located in the north of Mexico, as part of an affirmative action policy that began in 2017. Through the phenomenological method, with an interpretative framework and qualitative approach, this research examines the testimonies of 15 key informants using in-depth interviews, in order to convey the academic challenges they went through during the school lockdown and isolation period of the health emergency caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus, including the development of their dissertation to obtain their degree. The chapter reveals the extreme difficulties they experienced due to the lack of suitable computer equipment, internet connection, and absence of an adequate digital competence. For the ones that had to do their thesis report in order to graduate, having to write their theses in a second language meant an additional obstacle as well.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous population throughout the globe have been historically marginalized in the economic, social and educational realms (Bello and Rangel, 2002); a phenomenon whose repercussions still have an echo in present day. The efforts in different areas through public policies and educational reforms have not had the desired outcome (Horbath and García, 2012), so the need to generate a real and permanent change has become unavoidable. Additionally, circumstances such as the health emergency due to the SARS-COV-2 virus has exacerbated the previously vulnerable situation of the indigenous population, due

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to their low socioeconomic level which prevents them from accessing the necessary tools and means to continue their education process in an online setting.

This chapter will examine how indigenous students of a normal rural school¹ located in the north of Mexico, which is an all women boarding school higher education institution, have experienced the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. It will provide first person testimonies about the challenges the students went through during this period of time, their academic experiences (including the process of constructing their thesis report in order to graduate) and how all of these circumstances impacted their emotional wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

Ricardo Flores Magón Rural Normal School (ENRRFM), is located in Saucillo city, which is in the state of Chihuahua, in the north of Mexico. This school was founded in 1931 and it offers two different bachelor's degrees: Elementary Education and Preschool Education. Since the ENRRFM is a rural institution, it functions as a boarding school exclusively for women, with a full schedule from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. This Normal School has approximately 400 students between first and fourth grade, most of them from the states of Chihuahua and Durango.

Rural Normal Schools were created after the Mexican Revolution, the first of its kind in Latin America (Salas, 2018) with an important influence of the political ideals to eradicate poverty by schooling: "Education, until then far away from the most impoverished sectors of society, played an important role: the challenge for the rural school was to become the engine for the social transformation" (Elortegui, 2017, p.163). During the 1920s, Regional Normal and Central Agriculture Schools were founded to train students on teaching how to read and write, as well as master new agriculture techniques. Later, when these institutions merged, they changed their name to Peasant Regionals and in 1926 they officially become Rural Normal Schools (Padilla, 2009).

The boarding school modality originated as a way to reduce the inequality that less privileged populations had because students are provided with meals, school supplies, uniform, psychological support, medical and assistance services, as well as tuition fees without any additional cost. It also has a fully equipped computer laboratory with internet connection, where students can use the equipment to do their homework.

That is why "rural Normal Schools were the only way by which farmers could socially ascend" (Padilla, 2009, p.88). Particularly for women, these schools "offered a new life option as gateway to study and work, because when they graduated a permanent position as teacher was granted, but also as a survival mode, because they offered scholarships so students could live in the boarding schools" (Civera, 2010, p. 5).

One peculiarity of the classes in Saucillo's Normal is that, since the 2017-2018 school year, 15 places were opened and reserved exclusively for indigenous students, increasing the enrollment by 20 for the 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year. This type of educational policy is considered an affirmative action, which centers in "the affirmation and acknowledgment of linguistic and cultural diversity and the demands of wide indigenous sectors that claim the end of social inequality and exclusion" (Bermúdez, 2016, p. 81). They are projects implement differential measures to ensure the access, permanence and graduation of indigenous students (Ossola, 2016).

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