

Academic performance and experiences of Mayan university students on Yucatan, Mexico

Desempeño académico y experiencias de estudiantes universitarios mayas en Yucatán, México

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Abstract

This research was performed under a qualitative methodology, using the collective case study. It describes the academic experiences that have been characterized with outstanding academic performance, college students emphasizing their difficulties and strategies used to weigh such situations. The participants were three Mayan University students of a public University in Yucatan, Mexico. The semi-structured interview and the field journal as data collection techniques was used. Apparently, all three cases is facing economic issue as a main problem in their vocational training; the difficulty of using the equipment and technological resources, criticism of the personal appearance by others, and the lack of support and credibility by parents for prepare professionally were identified

like obstacles. Despite this, students considered that a proper organization of the time, a proper communication with professors, personal self-management, as well as the frequent use of the institutional mentoring and scholarship programs it excellence, allow them to lessen the difficulties and achieve good results as University students. Many of the findings were similar in the literature that had been reported in previous years and it is regrettable to still observe today.

Keywords: Higher education, academic performance, social inequality, poverty, social vulnerability, Yucatan, Mexico.

Resumen

Esta investigación fue realizada bajo una metodología cualitativa, empleando el estudio de caso

colectivo. Se describen las experiencias académicas que han tenido los estudiantes universitarios mayas caracterizados con un desempeño académico sobresaliente, enfatizando en sus dificultades y las estrategias empleadas para sopesar tales situaciones. Los participantes fueron tres estudiantes universitarios mayas de una universidad pública en Yucatán, México. Se utilizó la entrevista semiestructurada y el diario de campo como técnicas de recolección. Al parecer, los tres casos se enfrentan al asunto económico como principal problema ante su formación profesional; la dificultad para emplear los equipos y recursos tecnológicos, la crítica a la imagen por parte de los demás, y la falta de apoyo y credibilidad por parte de los padres para formarse

profesionalmente fueron otros obstáculos identificados. A pesar de ello, los estudiantes consideran que una correcta organización del tiempo, una adecuada comunicación con los profesores, una autogestión personal, así como el empleo frecuente de la tutoría institucional y los programas de becas a la excelencia, les permiten aminorar las dificultades y conseguir buenos resultados como universitarios. Mucho de los hallazgos fueron similares a la literatura que había sido reportada en años anteriores siendo lamentable observarlos en la actualidad.

Descriptor: Educación superior; desempeño académico, desigualdad social, pobreza, vulnerabilidad social, Yucatán, México.

1. Introduction

In Latin America, the percentage of students between 18 and 24 years old enrolled in higher education increased from 21% in 2000 to 40% in 2010, particularly among low and middle income groups, on average, the poorest 50% of the population represented 16% of higher education students in 2000 and this figure grew around 25% in 2013 (World Bank, 2017). However, despite the advances, in Mexico there are still wide differences in coverage in the rural and urban contexts (Giorguli and Angoa, 2016; Solis, 2010) as well as gender inequalities for access in various states of the country, since women have not equated their levels of school achievement with men, according to the census of In 2010, the gap becomes more evident in university access even in the capital city when 25% of men complete their entire university compared to 18% of women who complete it (Brunet, 2016).

Higher Education (ES) in Mexico, only 20% of the poorest young people in the national level have access to higher education, while those with the highest incomes are four times more likely to pursue a university degree, an inequality that it shows the inability of the country to prevent the class origin from conditioning the educational, social and labor destiny of that sector (Peñaloza, 2011). In education the founda-

tions of equal opportunities are laid, and in Mexico this inequality is the one that deeply and persistently marks the social gaps (Saraví, 2015). Vulnerable populations are affected by social factors such as poverty that prevent the school from being seen as an instrument of improvement in society; the educational experience is limited by activities such as child or adolescent work that ultimately affect school performance. In the same way, it contributes to social divisions through selective access to institutions, according to the socioeconomic origin of the students, as mentioned by Tuirán (2011).

In Mexico, 10% of the population belongs to one of the 68 linguistic groups, which are geographically located mainly in the center, south and southeast of Mexico, the states that belong to this area, have low rates of social and economic development (Monroy, 2010) and statistically women speaking indigenous language reach on average less than 6 years of primary school (5.2 years), the gender gap in the indigenous are much larger than the ethnic gaps. In particular, among speakers of indigenous language, men have almost three years on average more school attendance than women (Vázquez, 2016); 27% of indigenous youth over 15 years of age, only 1% of indigenous people who attend primary school have access to the higher level, of which one in five students graduates (Schmelkes, 2013), because of the challenges of access, permanence



and conclusion that implies carrying out university studies (CONEVAL, 2011). In the same way, in the previous educational levels the minimum parameters on school and academic performance have not been defined (Zorrilla, 2010). On the other hand, the number of indigenous students enrolled in higher education is ignored, since the institutions that are not indigenous and intercultural universities do not report the student's ethnic origin (Didou, 2014).

The educational lag is lived in each indigenous student who wishes to continue with their studies and migrates to the cities to have access to a good education. The marked gap in educational quality due to geographic inaccessibility, lack of services, limited opportunities, as well as the lack of family resources drags marked academic deficiencies (CONEVAL, 2011). With these conditions, it is almost inevitable that the learning results are very poor and below what is reasonably expected (Saraví, 2015). These factors have an impact on academic performance and are shown in the unfavorable results presented by indigenous students in standardized tests such as EXCALE, located at the lowest levels I and II, (INEE, 2010) compared to their city counterparts who have different educational trajectories, as indicated by Abiedi (2015), poverty limits the potential of students and this impacts on academic achievement. In addition to the academic situation, the indigenous student has to face new problems that affect their school performance because they have a different culture from their peers, the change of context from their place of origin to the city can represent, for the family, an important loss, the uncertainty of maintaining transportation and maintenance costs generated by studying higher education and the discriminatory factors suffered by those who seek and are attracted by new opportunities for improvement (Carnoy, Santibañez, Maldonado and Ordorika, 2002).

Access to higher education in Mexico is a privilege that not all young Mexicans can boast and those who manage to enter face factors that affect their trajectories through this educa-

tional level (Tuirán, 2011). Factors such as social homogenization, pedagogical infrastructure and educational quality reproduce inequalities in the educational system, the social characteristics of students at this educational level make segmentation among students (Savarí, 2015). Despite this, there are currently support programs aimed at young people in higher education to continue their studies and reduce the external disadvantages of higher education. Despite the opportunities to continue their studies, problems persist that affect the completion of studies, problems that contribute to reproduce social stratification (Blanco, 2014).

Specifically, in the state of Yucatan, certain social causes of educational lag have been identified for Maya students: mainly social discrimination because of speaking their native language and the indigenous traits they possess, as well as traditional dress; the family of the students are another cause of lag, since by not having studies, they do not see education as an instrument to have better opportunities and a better quality of life; the media that they access through television seem more attractive to them than attending school; These causes mainly cause that they cannot complete basic education and reach higher education (Mijangos, 2009).

Laying out the problem

In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, it is a privilege to have access to higher education and for the indigenous population it is more difficult because of the few development opportunities. Despite these setbacks, it is essential that indigenous people have access to this educational level (Schmelkes, 2003) that allows them to have a better quality of life and social equity (Silas, 2010).

To access higher education institutions, applicants take a standardized admission test and those who manage to join form heterogeneous groups of students and, among them, are indigenous students who have faced an obstacle to



the dominant culture that. until some years ago, were invisible for institutions of higher education (Carmona, 2013). If mestizo students have significant academic differences, indigenous university students are at a disadvantage compared to the former because they enjoy having Spanish a smother tongue and a more consistent academic education that is requires to develop higher level studies (Ortelli and Sartorello, 2011). Dubet (2005) identifies that once inside higher education institutions, university students face several obstacles in their academic experience that have to do with the type of university organization, the content of the studies, the purpose of the studies, the interactions with their peers and other factors that influence the decision to remain or abandon their studies.

Based on the above, Schmelkes (2003) mentions that the few indigenous students who manage to enter an institution of higher education, manage to successfully perform despite the disadvantages they have with respect to their peers who have had a better preparation. Savarí (2015) identifies two dimensions that students live by passing through the school, the first one refers to the inclusion of the individual within a group to which they have to adapt and respond to the established structure. The author mentions it as the experience of the role; the second dimension refers to the particular experience in the individual trajectory, that is, the biographical experience itself.

Por ello, que surge el interés de conocer más sobre la vida escolar de los estudiantes universitarios mayas con desempeño académico sobresaliente, para saber cómo experimentan, significan e incorporan sus realidades en el nivel educativo que están estudiando, las situaciones y estrategias a las que se han enfrentado para permanecer en la universidad. Considering that the Mayan population consist of young people who come from Mayan speaking families, speak or understand the Mayan language, in some cases they come from rural communities, have difficulties in accessing higher education and

that few are those who enter the university, the approach to the research problem arises with the following question:

What are the academic experiences of Maya university students characterized by outstanding academic performance?

Before the question, the following objectives are presented that address this research report.

- Determine the main obstacles that the Mayan university student has faced with outstanding academic performance.
- Determine the strategies employed by Maya college students to achieve outstanding academic performance.

It is important to mention that the present study was part of a macro research project that referred to the study of cases belonging to institutions of higher education located in the state of Yucatan, Mexico, and that focused on determining the conditions of inequality in ES in the State. The success cases identified during the macro study, gave rise to the interest of this report in order to share the findings, considering that the study subjects were scarce, or that ironically it makes the study relevant in its essence.

Theoretical basis

Education has been considered as one of the main mechanisms of social mobility and, therefore, as one of the ideal instruments to combat inequality and improve the quality of life of young Mayans who are in the university (Gallart and Henríquez, 2006), however, in contrast we observed inequalities in the access to the Mexican educational system, which seem to indicate that access to knowledge is a privilege for the best positioned, denying the possibility of personal and social development (OEI, 2010) and that according to Sociological approaches, it seems that the school is only a scenario to direct the reproduction of stratification (Zorrilla, 2010). It



is interesting to note that the countries that are lagging behind in achieving universal education for their children and adolescents are precisely those with the highest proportion of indigenous population (Ibarrola, 2014).

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in the enrollment of higher education in the countries of Latin America, it should be mentioned that the attention rate was uneven within each country in terms of economic, cultural and population group inequalities (Ibarrola, 2014). Even though Mayan students do not have the same possibilities of accessing a higher education institution, there are some who manage to enter the university and remain until graduation with an outstanding academic performance despite the social and economic difficulties they face during their stay in said institution (Rodríguez and Valdivieso, 2008). In an investigation carried out by the previous authors, they found that the social, economic and cultural context in which an indigenous student lives has a determining influence on their chances of obtaining an outstanding academic performance, which in most of the times positively influences the self-esteem of the student. Based on the above, Mayan students assimilate that some win and others lose and that the rewards, like good grades, deserve only those who have put in effort. That is why they learn the relationship between performance and gratification, because it is a reward, which rewards the effort and dedication that the student obtained during their stay at the university (Ramírez, Devia and León, 2011).

The State is committed to the creation of programs that benefit Mayan students to stay in higher education and conclude a university career. One example is the creation of the Support Grant Program that helps the student access and stay in the university whose purpose is to provide the economic resources for the student to attend the university and complete their higher education; has as a requirement that the student has a good average and maintain it until finishing their university

studies (Gallart and Henríquez, 2006). When the student of indigenous communities enters the university, it changes his behavior, his way of dressing, acting, his language, among other aspects. This is due to the fact that his living with people of different cultures and socio-economic level, however, some students, like the Mayans, preserve their cultural identity. On the other hand, some young Mayans adopt new ideologies of the dominant culture to be accepted and that their stay at the university is more pleasant, to what Edgardo Lander calls the coloniality of knowledge (Schmelkes, 2003).

At the time, Carnoy, Santibañez, Maldonado and Ordorika (2002) identified five obstacles that indigenous university students suffer and that maintain resistance to remain at this educational level. These obstacles have to do with geographical distance, as there are no higher education institutions near the communities, since these are located in state capitals, which forces young indigenous people to emigrate; cultural barriers, cataloged as one of the most important for being a gap of "migratory shock" with adaptation problems, and the language barriers themselves that cause confusion in the communication system and therefore puts them at a disadvantage in the educational system; the economic barriers that prevent families from dealing with the financing of transportation, housing, books, food, tuition required to study higher education; the low educational quality that they received in the previous levels puts them at a disadvantage when they take the entrance exams to enter higher education and the factors of discrimination due to their origin causes problems of interaction with the mestizo classmates.

Some university students, belonging to more urbanized areas, despite having good material conditions, adequate cultural capital and expanded cultural codes, do not have outstanding academic performance at school and, at the other extreme, Maya university students who,



despite studying in the most unfavorable conditions, obtain an outstanding academic performance (Ramírez, Devia and León, 2011). In this regard, Rodríguez and Valdivieso (2008), found that the most important factors for the Maya university student to achieve outstanding academic performance are not due to the teacher, the curriculum, or the school apparatus, but to the conditions of the family context, aspect that is outside the scope of action of the educational authorities. Additionally, they identify poverty and gender as key factors that keep students vulnerable, away from school.

Faced with these challenges, indigenous students with outstanding academic performance implement strategies to stay and successfully finish their academic career, as they confirm the commitment they acquire with the family when they decide to study outside their place of origin and value the effort of the families to support his studies (Chávez, 2008).

2. Methodology

The research work was carried out under the qualitative approach, as it helped to understand the nature of a problem, in this case, the experiences of Mayan students with outstanding academic performance, so that individuals can understand their reality. A collective case study was carried out (Stake, 2005). For this study, the participants were three Mayan university students with outstanding academic performance from three different bachelor's degrees (nursing, education and accounting) from a public university located in eastern Yucatan, Mexico; for the selection, specific characteristics were established: that the students are enrolled in one of the three aforementioned degrees; who are in the age range of 18 to 24 years; that they have a general academic average in the range of 90 to 100 and that they are university students of Mayan origin.

"To obtain information for this study, the interview was used, since it seeks to understand

the world from the perspective of the interested party and to shred the meanings of their experiences (Álvarez-Gayou, 2003). Another technique used was the field diary (Flick, 2004), which was used for updated information and was written by research subjects for four months, a report by week in the semester from August to December 2015". The treatment of the data was carried out through content analysis, which allowed the grouping of the answers issued by the participants in specific categories, for their subsequent interpretation, as proposed by Creswell (2009). To validate and verify the obtained data, a strategy of methodological triangulation was used: the interview, interview review by the interviewees and the field diary, which together complement the data collection (Denzin cited by Flick, 2004).

3. Results

Considering the objectives of the study, the results are reported based on each of the three cases, using pseudonyms to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality.

Case 1. Carlos

MAIN OBSTACLES

The obstacle that Carlos has faced is the management and contact with technology, since it affects his development in the university, more in the use of the office package when carrying out the school tasks, which affects his grades. Apparently, when students are not familiar with technology, it is difficult for them to adapt to the technological devices used in their Institution of Higher Education. The above is verified with the following comment:

When I went to school, I knew very little about computers, and when I asked for homework, it made me nervous; I think it made them very slow. I saw my peers and that did not happen to them; the internet cost me a lot of work, the issue of searching specifically (Yucatan, November, 2015).



The economic issue was another barrier to develop his studies, since the lack of financial resources did not allow him to cover his personal and academic needs as a university student. In the same way, he has faced the long traveling time from its place of origin to the city where the University is located. By not having the economic resources to stay in the city where the university is located, he had to travel every day and, therefore, lose time that you can invest in academic tasks.

Implemented Strategies

Carlos believes that a true organization of his time can be the key to obtain an outstanding academic level, because he uses his time selecting the spaces to study, as well as completing his academic tasks in a timely manner. Apparently, this student takes advantage of the opportunities that are presented in his university life and pays close attention to the calls that are published, either to participate in cultural events (oratory, marathons) or for local and national academic events (exchanges, summers of investigation). He believes it is necessary to have a career, relate and make contacts in the professional field.

Case 2. Guadalupe

MAIN OBSTACLES

Apparently, Guadalupe has also faced the economic challenges, but referred more to having to deal with health issues than with the scarce monetary resources that didn't allow her to go to a specialist doctor. This has caused difficulties in the attendance of classes and assignments that she delivered late. Added to this, this student has to work in a stationery in her community therefore she has trouble finding time to study, but it is a prevailing need to earn an income. She commented:

... I had a gastritis problem and with stress it gets worse. Sometimes I need to buy my medications but I don't have enough. I go to the

medical service of my university but there, they only give me remedial things ... the time almost never enough to do the tasks as I would like, but I have to work (Yucatan, September, 2015).

On the other hand, Guadalupe considers self-concept and self-image as an obstacle, as well as external beliefs and social influence that arise from the fact of being of Mayan origin. The above has an influence on the relationship with others and inclusion in the group. In certain occasions, some peers tell her that she speaks with a marked Mayan accentuation, and sometimes even suggest modifying his dress for school or social activities.

Implemented Strategies

Faced with the obstacles expressed by the student, she believes that a correct agenda organization allows her to size the time, even when she has to work part time. She believes that when overcoming is desired, any space is sought to fulfill the activities and commitments. Likewise, maintaining close communication with teachers and expressing difficulties is an adequate strategy for others to understand her needs; learning to negotiate, speak and work as a team has allowed him to advance throughout the semesters.

Regarding her identity, this university works every day with her self-concept; she has discovered that she possesses great value, for her peers show her their admiration and frequently come for her help with tasks. The foregoing allowed her to have some strength when facing the criticism towards her person. She considers that it has not been an easy road, and that at some point she thought about abandoning the career, but she has discovered a lot of future seeing herself as a professional.

Case 3. Raquel

MAIN OBSTACLES

The main obstacle that Raquel has faced has been the lack of support and credibility of her par-



ents and family in pursuing a professional career. Apparently, the family states that it is not necessary to study so long and get a “good” job. To the above is added the rejection of a university career due to the fact of being a woman, since she would be spending time and money in a career training that she will not practice, in the end she will end up married and with children. All this wears out Raquel, preferring to ignore the comments and avoiding sharing many of her school achievements.

Since I started the career I knew that nobody would support me, but I trust that it will be worth it. My mom thinks that I will not finish it and that I’m sure I’ll be pregnant with some guy from the town. I have said no, but they do not believe it (Yucatan, October, 2015).

As in the previous cases, this student faces economic problems every day, since she must move from a town that is 40 minutes away from the municipality, in addition to the expenses that her career entails. The most complicated thing is not to be able to count on the financial support of her parents considering the position they have.

Implemented Strategies

Raquel believes that getting up every day with a proactive attitude is a good strategy to stand up against such an obstacle. She knows that her condition of vulnerability makes her disadvantaged before her classmates but she firmly believes that she can achieve her title. Try to maintain a close relationship with the teachers, as they continually give her advice and share reading materials or products that provide additional learning.

Taking advantage of the institutional program of Tutoring, this student trusts the benefits of said system; she believes that an adequate accompaniment allows her to weigh the daily difficulties; in her case, her tutor is very aware of her and they continuously review her file to establish and implement study techniques, in some cases she has had to resort to psychological attention.

Additionally, Raquel seeks to maintain the maintenance grant through the federal government

programs, which provide a monthly income; this allows her to cover her basic needs of the school.

4. Discussion

Despite the adversities that the Mayan student faces in the university, some manage to obtain an outstanding academic performance which is described as having knowledge and skills with sufficiency and promotion that stands out from the rest of their study group (Erazo, 2011). Following the same line of the cited author, in order for a student to have an exemplary academic performance, it is not enough for him/her to do well, in an exam or in a course, he/she must have a more or less permanent, systematic and recurrent behavior that allows him/her to internalize the norms of the school institution, study and “get it right” according to the parameters of the school. For this, they must have the discipline, habits and interest to devote themselves to study, for which the student internalizes a persevering attitude, because only the intellectual capacity would not be enough to excel in the school environment.

Analyzing the three cases that made up this research, it can be concluded that the economic issue, lack of monetary resources, is an inevitable factor in the walk of all university students, and much greater in the case of those who come from rural communities with the dream to achieve professional training. Many of them face the difficulty of acquiring didactic materials, food during their stay in the academic day, payment of transport from their place of origin to the university, as well as little or no specialized medical assistance; It is understandable that, being from a rural community, the family is engaged in rural activities and the income is, to a large extent, to cover the basic needs of the household; therefore, these students can hardly obtain great monetary support from their parents or relatives. In spite of the above, in all three cases they have shown resolve in order to maintain themselves in their educational program, and with an outstanding performance. In



addition to the above, Mijangos (2009) stated, years ago, that the scarcity of economic resources of indigenous families directly affects the desires of young people to overcome at the higher level. This is clear, where it seems that government programs are not enough in the coverage or solvency of this need. It seems necessary to review what is still being done, with a clear purpose of evaluating social policies and programs.

Regarding the limited time students have to carry out their academic activities, either by working partially or by transferring their community to the main municipality, it seems that a good organization of time and commitment to achieve optimal results, being similar to what Rodríguez and Valdivieso (2008) declared. In the same way, these students consider that in the case of feeling overwhelmed by their reality, they try to maintain a positive attitude and focus on the future that keeps them firm when facing obstacles.

Although in the theory reported that indigenous women are more limited to the access of professional training, according to Brunet (2016), in the university to which the three cases analyzed in this study belong, two were women who showed highly recognized academic performances in comparison to their non-indigenous classmates; they not only have to face the typical barriers of every student in the rural community, but also the lack of credibility of the family and society. Apparently, they have broken schemes and could become managers for the motivation of future generations, or change agents. Related to this, it seems that the teacher has a preponderant role in the performance and growth of the students, since in the studied cases it was mentioned that the relationship and close communication with the teachers allow the student to obtain additional knowledge to those transmitted in the classroom, which indicates that the interactions with the teachers can motivate more strongly the interest of young people towards overcoming (Rué, 2009).

It is worth considering that many of these situations described as difficulties in professional

training have to do with the adaptation process that all students face when they start their higher education (Ferreira, Avitabile, Botero, Haimovich, and Urzúa (2017), considering that for some who are in conditions of vulnerability these difficulties are potentiated by the simple fact of coming from rural communities or previous academic training with deficient levels, which include not only the poor management of the technologies, but the very social interaction.

5. Conclusions

It is clear that this study is not generalizable to populations with similar conditions, but in the face of this phenomenon that is poorly studied in the context, it can mean a contribution to scientific work and proposals towards educational policy.

In view of the mentioned above, the educational authorities should design in the IES programs or projects that focus on the indigenous university students, and in their case with outstanding academic performance, so that they develop all their potential and acquire experiences for their professional development, seeking their motivation keep to going. These programs must be designed considering the needs of the context, with the participation of professors and administrators who go towards the achievement of the same objectives. It is worth mentioning that when talking about programs aimed at a specific population, it is not determining the discrimination of them, what is intended is to meet certain needs that are not generalizable to the entire student community due to their own conditions. It is even hoped that we could work in a culture of inclusion within the educational organization. The participation of the upper secondary education system would seem to be inherent, so the program or project should be invited to allow, from its training functions, to identify students who are in the classrooms and who have characteristics similar to those of this study; In this way, it could be anticipated and provide attention and promotion for them to



complete their studies of secondary education and continue their way towards higher education.

Regarding student support or subsidy programs, a timely review of the allocation and quantity of resources is necessary for those students who require it, accompanied by an effective follow-up of them (Schmelkes, 2007). It is important to put aside, the simple conception that these government programs fulfill their function by the simple fact of being part of public policies, it requires campaigns for a culture of value that integrates the family, society and school. Working towards an educational equity in higher education is a very broad field (Köster, 2016); It should begin with identifying the current situation in the educational setting to determine specific strategies that allow an effective permanence of the students.

Studies like the one described, allow us to show the great terrain that is necessary to attend to a great magnitude and with much broader populations; It is a space open to the scientific community to continue the development of studies that deepen with other types of designs and techniques to obtain information, from sociological and educational perspectives.

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