

# “Do Not Dig Further Back”: The 500-Year Assimilation Project in Mexico

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to affirm that music educators have agency to foster collaborations with local culture bearers, particularly in contexts where a strong influence of music with Indigenous roots exists. This can be done in Mexico, despite the lack of Indigenous perspectives in the nation’s national curriculum. Music educators have the freedom at the local level to decentre the idea that knowledge connected to Indigenous cultures is less valuable than forms of knowledge associated with a Western-European paradigm. In order to demonstrate the importance of embracing Indigenous perspectives via music in Mexico’s educational system, I provide narratives of Huasteco Culture Bearers (HCBs). The HCBs interviewed reflect on their personal journeys as they have personally experienced the undermining of their ways of knowing and being by people working in the educational system; at the same time, the HCBs share their interest in seeking meaningful collaborations with music educators in order that students can learn and engage with their own local cultures via music making in schools going forward.

## Keywords

Indigenous music, education in Mexico, music education, colonialism

**D**uring my most recent trip back home to Mexico, I was invited to a middle school (Grades 7–9) to do a presentation for students. The director of the school wanted me to describe my journey as a musician, so I talked to students about the diverse experiences I have had in my artistic and academic journey. Towards the end of my presentation, I shared with the students how my doctoral program was my most rewarding learning experience to date, not due to writing a dissertation (which of course is significant), but most of all because it provided me with time to reflect on who I was, who I am, and who I wanted to be as a person of Totonac Indigenous (from the central part of what is now known as the Mexican state of Veracruz) and Spanish ancestry.

Using my personal journey as a connection point, I asked people in the classroom to raise their hands if they had Indigenous ancestry. There were some seconds of hesitation before five to seven students (out of approximately 70 students) raised their hands. Four out of five educators present at that moment raised their hands as well. I was surprised by the relatively small number of students who raised their hands, since at least 80 percent of the students likely had Indigenous heritage based on my knowledge of the population makeup of the town. I was not the only one surprised that only a few students raised their hands. One of the educators asked for the opportunity to speak. He told students that it was important for them to be proud of their Indigenous ancestry. He recalled that when he was a teenager, he had studied in the same middle school where he was currently teaching (and where this presentation was taking place). He said something along these lines: “Do you know one of the main causes why you can no longer find people who speak Totonac in one of the communities close by? When I was a student at this middle school, other students and I used to make fun of students from a community close by who came to study here. We made fun of them for the way they spoke Spanish (for their accent). They used to speak with each other in Totonac, and we made fun of them for that. Eventually, they decided to stop speaking it because we bullied them. New generations of students from this community who come to study here nowadays do not know their language anymore, and it is partly because of the discrimination that their parents suffered. Our current students tell us that they do not speak the Totonac language anymore.”

Unfortunately, this story is one of many similar stories I have heard throughout my life, and more specifically during the course of my research, working in communities with a high percentage of people with Indigenous ancestry. These people have shared formally and informally that they regret not

being able to speak their Indigenous language or know more about their cultural practices; nevertheless, even if they do not agree with their family members' decisions not to transmit their Indigenous language to them, they understand the rationale behind them: the parents or grandparents consciously decided not to teach to them their Indigenous languages in order to "protect" them. In my personal journey to better understand who I am in terms of my Indigeneity, I have faced similar issues. When I was a child and asked my father about my Indigenous heritage, he told me, "You only need to care who you are from this point forward. Do not dig further back." Eventually, through digging further despite his advice, I better understood why I was told not to dig further: our history included displacement and death, which were tied to our Indigenous identity. I chose not to share what I had come to understand with the middle school students that day.

When I reflected later on my visit to the middle school, I could not stop thinking about what I would have done when I was at the same point in my life as those students. Would I have raised my hand to acknowledge my Indigenous ancestry? How would raising my hand have affected the way my classmates saw me? Would I have become the subject of discrimination or bullying from my classmates? It is likely that I would have left my hand down, just as the majority of students did when I asked them about their ancestry. On the day of that visit to the middle school, I was at the crossroads where educational policies and curriculum are distilled into practice: the classroom.

It is difficult to disrupt the foundations that have served to undermine and support discrimination against Indigenous peoples in schools when Indigenous peoples and their perspectives are not a foundational aspect of Mexico's educational system. In this article, I describe how the Mexican government has worked to assimilate Indigenous peoples and their cultures into a cohesive national identity and the effects this effort has had on them; many have rejected their Indigenous heritage for fear of suffering discrimination in their everyday lives. For this discussion, I engage primarily with works of Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors who have addressed decolonial issues from the perspective of what is known in the Anglo-American context as Latin America. My reason for doing this is to address and target the particularities of the colonial project imposed on the people of this geographical region, as well as highlight current challenges arising from colonialism there. I reflect on the state of current educational policy in Mexico and how it has failed to embed Indigenous ways of knowing and being at the school level. In order to redress the lack of support and visibility of Indigenous perspectives in the national curriculum (K–12), I

argue that students should be provided with culturally significant learning experiences supported by Indigenous culture bearers at the local level. It is crucial for music teachers and general educators at the local level to recognize they have agency to seek local partnerships and meaningfully address what macro educational structures have failed to provide. For the purpose of this paper, I refer to narratives from semi-structured interviews with Huasteco Culture Bearers (HCBs) from a previous study (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021). The HCBs interviewed reflect on their personal experiences as they have faced the undermining of their ways of knowing and being, but at the same time, they reflect on ways forward to embrace Indigenous perspectives in the classrooms.

## The national educational project or the national assimilation project?

In his book *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla (1996) provides an historical account of the challenges and struggles that Indigenous peoples have faced since colonial times in what is now known as Mexico. Throughout the book, Bonfil-Batalla contrasts two perspectives by which Indigenous peoples' past, present, and future can be understood: Mexico profundo and imaginary Mexico. Mexico profundo (which can be translated as deep Mexico) describes the perspective of Indigenous peoples who speak their language and live in their home communities, those in "de-Indianized" rural communities, and those who live in urban centres. Meanwhile, imaginary Mexico has its roots in a westernization project that Spaniards started more than 500 years ago in what is now known as Mexico, and despite Mexican independence in the early 1800s, has adopted the "creation within Mexican society of a minority country organized according to the norms, aspirations, and goals of Western civilization" (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, xvi). In the imaginary Mexico, Indigenous cultures must be assimilated into the national mestizo identity. Bonfil-Batalla (1996) argues that imaginary Mexico is a project with which Mexico's nation-state has carried the assimilation effort forward over the past two centuries.

The assimilation process over the last 500 years has had diverse layers and components that began during Spanish colonization with the Spaniards rejecting the distinct characteristics of Indigenous groups and converting the Indigenous peoples to Catholicism. The Spaniards imposed a caste system that divided people in terms of the privileges that they had during colonial times in the New Spain Viceroyalty. Culturally distinct Indigenous groups were merged

into one single category: *Indio* (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Collin Harguindeguy 2017). Indigenous peoples were placed on the lowest rank in the caste system, and their bodies and lands were used as objects for exploitation (Quijano 2000; Tutino 2000). The original inhabitants of what is now known as Mexico served as subjects of the Spanish Crown, and its main function was to provide tribute (wealth generated from the Indigenous communities) and work (physical/individual labor for the Spanish project) (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Quijano 2000). Since the Spanish Crown took ownership over the “discovered” land, Indigenous peoples “were the Crown subjects who, through tribute, compensated the king for his ‘generous’ concession in allowing them use of the lands” (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, 89). The Catholic religion provided the ideological justification for the colonization project in New Spain, since Indigenous peoples were considered “savages,” “primitive,” and “uncivilized” beings whose souls needed to be saved; in the Spaniards’ view, Indigenous peoples needed to be converted to Catholicism by whatever means necessary (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Devalle 2000; Giménez 2000; Quijano 2000).

The conversion project that started during colonial times to “save” Indigenous peoples’ souls was replaced by a new and ongoing assimilation project to foster a homogeneous national mestizo identity when Mexico became a new sociopolitical entity after its independence in 1821 (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Coon 2015; Muyolema 2015; Stern 2000; Tutino 2000). The cultural diversity of Indigenous peoples was an obstacle to achieving such a goal. According to Muyolema (2015), the process of achieving a homogeneous mestizo culture required taking parts of diverse Indigenous cultures to serve as the roots—unseen below ground level—of the “new” culture. The assimilation project required Indigenous peoples to transition from “the situation of ‘caste’ in which they lived to a situation of ‘class,’ so that from this new position they might contribute to the overall transformation of national society” (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, 118). The task once conferred to the Catholic church to “civilize” Indigenous peoples was placed in the hands of the educational system to deal with “the Indigenous problem” (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Quijano 2000).

The *indigenismo* movement, an assimilation tool by the Mexican nation-state, had a significant impact on educational policy between 1916 and the end of the 1970s (Bonfil-Batalla 1996). A non-Indigenous elite created *indigenismo* as a theory that later transformed into practice to “educate” and integrate Indigenous peoples and cultures into the national mestizo project (Bonfil-Batalla 1996; Collin Harguindeguy 2017). Among the means used to assimilate Indigenous peoples were the *Misiones Culturales* (Cultural Missions). Cultural

Missions were started in 1925, only five years after the creation of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Public Education Secretariat). The *Secretaría* is a governmental body that since 1921 has overseen the planning and implementation of the national curriculum from kindergarten to Grade 12 (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2016).

According to Bonfil-Batalla (1996), at the beginning of the Cultural Missions, non-Indigenous educators were in charge of going into Indigenous communities to provide “culture,” something that the government presumed the Indigenous peoples lacked. Nevertheless, this strategy failed, since non-Indigenous educators were not able to communicate in Indigenous languages. Bonfil-Batalla (1996) describes how the strategy shifted to using Indigenous youth who were taken out of their communities and assimilated, so that “they would recognize the inferiority of their own culture and the superiority of national culture. Finally, they would return to their places of origin, now converted into ‘agents of change’... ‘fight fire with fire’ seems to be the motto.” (118). The goal was to plant a seed in the communities that would grow into accepting Western-European knowledge as superior to their own; therefore, they would need to change in order to be “civilized.”

Quijano’s (1992, 2000) concept of *coloniality* serves to explain how that seed eventually became a strong tree with roots seated in a powerful and accepted narrative, by which relationships of oppression continue to this day using the concept of race and division of labor as one of its core components. According to Quijano (2000), it is through the concept of race that “relationships of domination came to be considered as ‘natural.’ Such an idea was meant to explain not only the external or physiognomic differences between dominants and dominated, but also the mental and cultural differences” (216). It is possible to derive a connection between indigenismo and coloniality end goals, which are to embed in the collective mind that the formerly colonized people deserve to be and stay in a position of exploitation and discrimination just because of who they are. Scholars Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Walter D. Mignolo have proposed challenging coloniality using the lenses of the ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014) and decoloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), as they are ways of uncoupling from dominant narratives that place Western knowledge as “universal” and “valid”; these narratives have contributed to what Santos calls *epistemicide*, the death of knowledge connected to cultures that have been labeled as “Other.”

Mexico’s current educational policies, which favour integration instead of cultural diversity, enable the erasure of Indigenous languages in favour of the

dominant language (Spanish), since the use of the dominant language serves the purpose of assimilating the Indigenous population into the national identity project (Ibarra López and Calleros-Rodriguez 2017). The narrative of low academic achievement in Indigenous students is directly associated with a lower level of Spanish language skills. What this narrative fails to address is that national standardized tests do not assess the language ability of students in their first (Indigenous) language and that the formal instruction that Indigenous students receive on a daily basis is almost exclusively in Spanish. Mexico has two routes through which children and youth can access state-funded K–12 education: the Indigenous education branch and the general educational branch. Both follow the same national curriculum; nevertheless, the Mexican government invests \$65 USD per year per student in the Indigenous branch and \$600 USD per year per student in the general branch (Congreso de la Union 2020). In the Indigenous branch, students can access education in their own Indigenous languages from Grades 1–6, but only if there are educators available who are fluent in the language (Köster 2016).

Mexico's educational policy over the past 100 years has failed to acknowledge the value and importance of Indigenous cultures and those who bear them. Concurrently, the national assimilation project to create a unified mestizo society has perpetuated discrimination towards Indigenous peoples in everyday activities in Mexican society, starting when the country obtained its independence in the early 1800s. According to the *Encuesta Nacional Sobre Discriminación* (National Survey on Discrimination) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2017), 65 percent of the survey respondents said that Indigenous peoples' rights receive little respect or are not respected. Fully 36 percent of male survey respondents and 33 percent of female survey respondents agreed with the statement that "Indigenous peoples are poor due to their own Indigenous culture" (19). Meanwhile, 40.3 percent of Indigenous respondents declared that they had experienced discrimination at least one time in the previous five years due to being Indigenous. Experiencing discrimination just for being Indigenous may be one of the main reasons why people reject their Indigenous heritage. On this topic, Bonfil-Batalla (1996) comments:

Sometimes parents themselves encourage abandonment of the local culture. They do not want their children to speak "the dialect," or their daughters to wear traditional clothing, or their children to appear to be Indian. The symbols of the stigma must be eliminated. The fact is that stigma is one of the basic tools of cultural imposition. Stigma fulfills its discouraging functions in additional areas of daily life. (141)

Publicly embracing one's Indigeneity in Mexico (as in many other countries) is an act of courage for those who decide to do it. Especially vulnerable to discrimination and bullying are Indigenous children and youth who attend the general educational branch, since their ways of knowing and being might not be present and respected, and the number of people who embrace their Indigenous heritage proudly in an educational setting might be significantly low.

Gaztambide-Fernandez and Tuck (2013) have developed the idea of a *curriculum project of replacement*, a tool that serves the colonizer to displace and replace Indigenous peoples' "historical, epistemological, moral, and political claims to land" (74). When this approach is in place, Indigenous perspectives are not important—only folkloric representations that provide elements to foster a national identity are included. Indigenous perspectives are presented as part of the "past," belonging only to museums or as attractions for tourism. The dominant elites undermine Indigenous perspectives in favor of a Western-European paradigm that is an inheritance of colonialism, a never-accomplished journey to make the country more "White" (Rosabal-Coto 2016). In the words of Gaztambide-Fernandez and Tuck (2013), "The story is just a better story when there are more white people in it. Once the story is properly populated and the subaltern knowledge is absorbed, actual participation by Othered bodies is not necessary" (82). The idea that a single curriculum in which Indigenous perspectives are not embraced is used for the general and Indigenous educational branches is a clear example of the *curriculum project of replacement*, since the system as a whole is interested in forging a narrative in which the future of Mexico is a future of "Whiteness." In this case, Whiteness is not just a matter of skin color, but is the ideal of one day attaining a more "civilized" society (Rosabal-Coto 2016). In this regard, Western classical music is one of the forms of cultural capital that would enable mestizo people to access the desired Whiteness (Bourdieu 1984; Rosabal-Coto 2016). As addressed earlier in this section, the assimilation project of Indigenous peoples requires transitioning from an issue based on caste, to one which centers the concept of class as a rationale for rejecting Indigenous perspectives, including musics with Indigenous roots (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021).

Elsewhere, I have discussed the diverse challenges that the Indigenous education branch in Mexico has faced to date (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021). The 2016 national curriculum that is still in use across the country does not address the need to embed Indigenous ways of knowing in the classroom. A new curriculum with similar deficiencies in terms of the presence of Indigenous perspectives is under a pilot project phase (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2022). Despite the



absence of mandated Indigenous content in the pilot version of the curriculum, there is a call to contextualize the national mandatory content in the local context. This shift towards contextualization could provide an impetus for general educators and music educators to purposefully embed Indigenous perspectives in their praxis given the range of opportunities that contextualization of the mandatory content would provide.

A number of researchers in different contexts around the globe have reported that the most effective way of embedding Indigenous ways of knowing and being in music education classes and in music education research is through collaboration with Indigenous culture bearers (e.g., Kallio 2019; Locke and Prentice 2016; Prest 2020; Prest et al. 2021, 2023; Tuinstra 2019). Including Indigenous perspectives in classes requires an ongoing collaboration between educators and local culture bearers in order to amplify and centre the voices of knowledge keepers.

## Methodology

To address the concerns raised in this article, specifically around the need to foster relationships of collaboration between educators and local culture bearers and the potential challenges associated with these, I draw on empirical data from my doctoral study (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021). Indigenous methodologies (Chilisa 2012; Kovach 2009; Wilson 2008) and narrative inquiry methodology (Bowman 2009; Clandinin and Connelly 2000) framed my research. After consulting existing literature in the field of Indigenous methodologies, I chose and developed *Chikomexochitl* (seven flower or corn child) as an Indigenous theoretical and methodological framework (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021; Vazquez-Cordoba and Flores Martinez 2023). *Chikomexochitl*, an Indigenous research methodology, centers process and patience as fundamental components when engaging in research (Vazquez-Cordoba and Flores Martinez 2023). Process and patience are fundamental in the growth and development of corn, hence the name. Furthermore, corn is a central component in the worldview of local Indigenous groups where my research took place. Participants spoke Spanish during the interviews and sharing circles. I transcribed the interviews and sharing circles, and I checked my written accounts with participants afterwards to ensure that their ideas were accurately reflected. Then, I translated the transcriptions to English. In Indigenous perspectives, validity relies on naming the person from whom one learned something (Kovach 2009). For this reason, participants agreed via a consent form that their names should be used as a way of

acknowledging their contributions to this study. This process was approved by the research ethics board at the university with which I was affiliated.

The research took place in the state of Veracruz, particularly in the city of Xalapa, and in the Huasteca region, specifically in Zontecomatlán and Chicontepepec. The Huasteca region covers parts of six different states in what is now known as Mexico and is a multiethnic area where Indigenous groups, including Teenek, Nahua, Hñuhú (Otomí), Tepehua, Totonaco, and Xi'oi (Pame) have shaped common cultural practices, one of which is music making (Bernal 2009; Camacho 2011; Güemes 2016). Huasteco music incorporates influences of Indigenous, Spanish, and African musics, and it has served to transmit the worldview of the Huasteco people from generation to generation through its use in both secular and ritual events (Bonilla and Gómez 2013; Camacho 2011; Güemes 2016).

A total of 17 people participated in the study: two women and 15 men, ages 20 to 75 (approximately). Only two women took part in the study because, historically, men have been more involved in Huasteco music making. Therefore, when I was introduced to senior HCBs, I encountered predominantly male musicians. Nevertheless, the number of women participating in music making has significantly increased over the last 20 years. According to what I witnessed at the events I attended and what I learned through informal communication, about 40 percent of the people who currently engage in Huasteco music making are women. My research was informed by Indigenous methodologies (e.g., the use of Chikomexochitl as a research methodology) and epistemologies; the findings of my doctoral research served to shape my ongoing research in Huasteco community-led initiatives.

I conducted an analysis to identify emerging themes (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006) that addressed the research questions of my dissertation (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021). For the purpose of this article, I discuss findings for the following research question: *What are potentially effective means by which music with Indigenous roots can be embedded in a good way in Mexico's national educational system?*<sup>1</sup> I will consider in particular two themes that emerged from the analysis: 1) Potential resistance to and challenges for the implementation of Huasteco music making in the educational system; and 2) Collaboration with administrators and teachers.

## Findings

As I discussed previously (above), the educational system in Mexico has historically not embraced Indigenous perspectives in the national curriculum, and this omission has shaped the ways instruction is delivered in both the Indigenous and general educational branches. Víctor Ramirez, a senior HCB reflected on the role that schooling has played in discouraging students from learning about their cultural heritage, particularly through the use of language:

There are a lot of Nahuatl speakers; it [Indigenous language] is not lost. Well ... it gets lost once the kids go to school. Teachers force them to speak in Spanish, and that is why the use of the language has been decreasing; nevertheless, once the kids go home, they speak Nahuatl with their parents. They start losing it, but there was a time when it was prohibited at school to speak Nahuatl. It was prohibited mainly because teachers did not understand what the kids were saying, and because of that, teachers prohibited Nahuatl in the classroom.

Víctor's testimony highlights the role that some educators played in assimilation processes (in this case, language), rather than embracing and acknowledging the cultural richness that students bring to their classrooms.

HCBs have urged educators to reach out to them in order to envision ways of collaborating. Arturo Fuentes, a son of one of the most prominent music culture bearers in the Huasteca region, commented:

The first thing is for teachers to be interested. If they are not interested, then there is not really a point, right? But if there were an approach from the teachers to my brother, Margarito, and me, then we would be more than happy to teach them, also to teach students the first steps to play the jarana, huapanguera, and violin. Students will then learn the style of *son* from Zontecomatlán, which is what we would really want. That is exactly what we want; we are not professional musicians, but we really want to do it because of the memory of my father Serafin ... We are willing to teach students.

Crescencio Hernandez, a Huasteco cultural promoter deeply involved in cultural revitalization, stressed the potential lack of commitment that educators might have if embedding Indigenous perspectives is not made mandatory in the curriculum:

For example, if I am a teacher, and I do not know the culture, the music, the [Indigenous] language, and the worldview of the community where I live, then it is better for me that the community is not interested in having me teach the music, the language. That is better for me, that means less work to do because also, the community will not see me in a strange way; they will not say that I don't belong to this place. The more they realize that I do not know things, it will be the best for me, also because the educational system does not require me to know this stuff... There are a lot of things that the educational system is not interested in. We Indigenous peoples do not know our own rights, we do

not know our traditional medicine, the music, the language—those are as important as any other style of music, language, or medicine. There is a lack of value attached to this knowledge because we assume that this is less worthy, right? We have not done many things; we have not addressed the usefulness of this knowledge. What do I need to learn Nahuatl for if I need English to do a graduate program? Why do I want to learn Huasteco music if I can learn the music of the great European composers?

Cresencio's narrative describes how educational policy prioritizes knowledge connected to Western-European perspectives over local Indigenous ways of knowing. At the same time, Cresencio stresses the need for educators to learn aspects of the local culture (e.g., music, language), which can contribute to building meaningful connections to the community where they teach.

One of the narratives that had perhaps the strongest impact on me was from HCB Osiris Caballero. He addressed the potential resistance that might arise not just in the institutions, but in society at large, when promoting knowledge connected to Huasteco culture:

I think that this is a good idea [to embrace Huasteco music in the educational system]. I think a lot of people would agree with this idea, but also, there will be people who would disagree. For example, the other day, a teacher from this area contacted me because his daughter wants to learn how to play the violin. But he told me that his daughter wants to learn nice music, [Western] classical music; she does not want to learn Huasteco music. Then, I told him, "You know what? I don't think I am the right person. I do not teach [Western] classical music, even though I have to study it sometimes. What I teach is Huasteco music. Sorry that I cannot help you with this." That is what I am telling you—there are a lot of people who would agree with this project, I think the majority of people. But at the same time, there will be some, maybe just a few, who would not agree with that project.

This conversation presents a clear example of a discourse that is ingrained and accepted in Mexican society: ways of knowing connected to Indigenous perspectives are not as valuable as Western-European knowledge.

## Discussion

One of the main challenges in fostering such collaborations between HCBs and school teachers (music educators and generalists) is that the current national curriculum and the pilot national curriculum do not address the need to embed Indigenous ways of knowing in Grades K–12 (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2016, 2022); therefore, educators are not expected to provide students with culturally-significant learning experiences about their local Indigenous cultures. Content addressing Indigenous peoples and their cultures has been historically

presented as a static past, buried in history books that do not address the contribution of Indigenous people in Mexico's present (Vazquez-Cordoba 2021).

Elsewhere (Vazquez-Cordoba 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023), I have argued for the need to embrace Indigenous perspectives in Mexico's national educational system via music with Indigenous roots. In the particular case of the Huasteca region, music educators reaching out to HCBs would be a decisive first step towards embracing Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. When children and youth have the opportunity to see local Indigenous cultural bearers as collaborators in the school system, the importance of embedding of Indigenous perspectives in the educational system will become validated for them. It is possible to envision a near future in which using an Indigenous language in the school system becomes a symbol of pride, rather than a symbol of shame. Such embedding would require music educators to seek collaborations with local Indigenous culture bearers who can teach students not only a series of songs, but more importantly, the relevance of music making as an important component in the secular and ritual life of their communities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the implications of music making in the ritual life of communities; nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the importance that music making has in ritual practices among Indigenous peoples in the Huasteca region (Vazquez-Cordoba and Flores Martinez 2023).

The statement quoted above, "He told me that his daughter wants to learn nice music, classical music; she does not want to learn Huasteco music," reflects the interests of many people in Mexico who seek, in different ways, to gain forms of capital connected to Western paradigms and access Whiteness (Rosabal-Coto 2016), their end goal being to escape systemic discrimination. In countries such as Mexico, where discrimination against Indigenous ways of knowing and being is embedded in society at large, access to education in classical music performance represents a tempting opportunity for acquiring "social mobility." I place social mobility in quotation marks because actual social mobility does not occur simply because children and youth have access to instruction in Western classical music; nevertheless, it is easier for governments to invest limited funding—compared to what is actually necessary to invest for people to have a better chance of achieving social mobility—in a music program that is purported to "change" children's lives in projects such as El Sistema (Baker 2014, 2016). If the idea of "progress" can be achieved only by viewing ways of knowing and being connected to Indigenous cultures as useless or worthy of discrimination, a major burden is placed on Indigenous peoples: they are forced to leave behind their culture. This rationale of undermining Indigenous perspectives is

part of the aftermath of centuries of colonialism in what is now known in Anglo-American contexts as Latin America (Rosabal-Coto 2016; Vazquez-Cordoba 2021).

In a country like Mexico, where education policymakers deem Indigenous knowledge unworthy of inclusion in the national curriculum, and where discrimination against Indigenous peoples in society at large is common and unquestioned, the educator might wonder, “why should I care about embracing musics rooted in local cultures in my practice, since they are not part of the curriculum?” I do believe that music educators have agency at a local level to shift the imposed paradigm of what music is and should be used for. If the final version of the national curriculum (currently in a pilot phase) continues to allow for local contextualization of mandatory content, educators will be able to embed Indigenous perspectives going forward and thus support the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. The narratives of the HCB who took part in my research project reflect the important role that a music educator can have as a mediator and bridge between the educational system and the knowledge that is embedded in local cultures.

When I think about the statement, “He told me that his daughter wants to learn nice music, classical music; she does not want to learn Huasteco music,” I cannot avoid reflecting on my own lived journey, both in my personal life and as a musician trained in the conservatory model, and how many times I have directly or indirectly undermined ways of knowing and musics outside the Western-European paradigm. To what extent am I both colonized and colonizer, not just in regards to music but in my daily actions, despite my Indigenous heritage?

## Final thoughts

Regardless of the efforts that started over 500 years ago by the Spaniards during active colonization, and then carried out by the Mexican nation-state to assimilate Indigenous peoples in a westernization project, Indigenous peoples and their knowledges are very much present in Mexico today. Without a doubt, resilience is a word that describes Indigenous peoples and their efforts to keep their cultural practices alive despite the discrimination they have experienced over the last five ~~past~~ centuries.

In a context such as Mexico, where both policymakers and government officials at different levels have failed to address or embed Indigenous perspectives, the role of the educator becomes even more crucial for promoting changes

at the ground level. Fostering collaborations with local culture bearers is a step forward toward disrupting the narratives that treat knowledge connected to Indigenous cultures, and therefore the perspectives of their bearers, as lacking in value. It is a simple, but perhaps not easy, decision for music educators to step forward and work in partnership with local culture bearers, due to the ongoing undermining of Indigenous perspectives in the educational system; nevertheless, it is important that they recognize themselves as crucial actors whose agency is key in centering respect and cooperation between local culture bearers, students, and schools through their teaching practice. If some people (such as policy makers) continue to build symbolic walls to keep Indigenous ways of knowing and being outside of the school system, it is up to others (such as community members and music educators) to bring down those walls.

## About the Author

Hector Vazquez-Cordoba is originally from Naolinco, Mexico. He completed his PhD in Educational Studies at the University of Victoria. His research was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship, and it addressed the embedding of music with Indigenous roots into Mexico's national elementary curriculum. Hector also holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Performance (Universidad Veracruzana) and a Master's degree in Education (Tecnológico de Monterrey). In 2022, he was awarded 1 of 10 Aspiration 2030 Postdoctoral Fellowships at the University of Victoria. Hector's current research project envisions collaborations between teacher candidates and Indigenous culture bearers in Coast Salish Territory (Canada) and the Huasteca region (Mexico). His research is supported by a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship, an ISME-SEMPRE Music Education Research Grant, and Agrigento: Music for Social Change, an organisation dedicated to advancing the field of music as social action.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> In using the phrase, “in a good way,” I mean to say in a way that respects Indigenous peoples’ ways of knowing and being. See Prest, et al. (2021).