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Intercultural Education and the Realization of Intercultural Capital in Mexico

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Abstract:

Contrary to what the seductive marketing power of neoliberal "free"-trade ideology and its more or less explicit postulation of *homo interculturalis* might suggest, the multi-dimensional realization of intercultural capital cannot simply be taken for granted, but needs to be subjected to critical empirically grounded scrutiny. Drawing on the findings of three recent research projects, the present article explores the prospects and limitations of intercultural capital realization in contemporary Mexico – at nearly two and a half decades of the country's membership in the quintessentially neoliberal North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and with a particular interest in the field of intercultural education. Whilst the article does not engage in evaluations of NAFTA, nor offer a contribution to the critique of neoliberal globalization and the mercantilization of formal education, it nonetheless raises important questions for all those interested in alternative forms of intercultural cooperation that convey a vision beyond narrowly instrumental business interests. As our three research examples forcefully illustrate, it is high time for a socioculturally sensitive educational development toward more intercultural literacy – both inside the multicultural national context and internationally.

Keywords: intercultural capital, intercultural education, Mexico, NAFTA, teachers



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1. Introduction

In times of increasing global interconnectedness and sociocultural diversity, opportunities of educational and professional development depend increasingly on the realization of intercultural capital in terms of awareness, acquisition, and application (Pöllmann 2009, 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Still, contrary to what the seductive marketing power of neoliberal "free"-trade ideology and its more or less explicit postulation of *homo interculturalis* might suggest, the multi-dimensional realization of intercultural capital cannot simply be taken for granted, but needs to be subjected to critical empirically grounded scrutiny. Drawing on the findings of three recent research projects, this article explores the prospects and limitations of intercultural capital realization in contemporary Mexico –two and a half decades after the country ascended to membership of the quintessentially neoliberal North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The first project consists of a nationally representative survey (i.e., 1200 Mexicans aged 15 and older) on their perceptions and experiences in the fields of culture, reading, sport, and intercultural contact. As the principal researcher, I designed the corresponding questionnaire, including a number of operational "measures" for the notion of intercultural capital. An interdisciplinary team of specialists of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) carried out the respective fieldwork in November 2014 as part of a series of national surveys, known as *Los Mexicanos Vistos por Sí Mismos: Los Grandes Temas Nacionales* (Flores / Morales Mena 2015). The corresponding book – *Cultura, Lectura y Deporte: Percepciones, Prácticas, Aprendizaje y Capital Intercultural* (Pöllmann / Sánchez Graillet 2015) – includes a series of exploratory analyses of both the sociocultural contingency and potential explanatory impact of people's personal intercultural capital.

The second project offers a critical analysis of *La Consulta Previa, Libre e Informada a Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas sobre la Evaluación Educativa* (INEE 2015) that the *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación* (INEE) implemented in 2014 in 49 rural indigenous communities, covering 18 different federal states. Without precedent in Mexico,

this major consultation followed a qualitative community-centred research strategy that involved a considerable number of distinguished experts, bringing together a variety of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic experiences and expertise. As part of a group of researchers of UNAM's *Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación*, my task was to elaborate an independent opinion and critical evaluation of the respective empirical findings in relation to intercultural objectives in existing curricular directives.

The third project looks at the perceived importance of intercultural learning opportunities in initial and continuous public secondary teacher education from the perspective of student teachers of the *Escuela Normal Superior de México* in Mexico City. As the principal investigator, I designed a self-completion questionnaire with a range of standardized and semi-standardized questions, which the 189 participating student teachers completed fully and extensively during fieldwork in autumn 2014. As we will see in the course of the following sections, the three aforementioned research projects provide a panorama of the unfulfilled potential of intercultural capital realization in contemporary Mexico, revealing sociocultural and educational realities that contrast sharply with the promotional glamour of “elite”-driven neoliberal cooperation frameworks such as NAFTA.

2. A multicultural nation characterized by intercultural illiteracy

It is worth noting that with Mexico, NAFTA includes one of the world's most diverse multicultural nations. Consequently, one may be tempted to conceive the country as the prodigy of intercultural capital embodiment – both internally, involving its many regions and (indigenous) cultures, and externally, in its relationship with Canada and the USA. However, as plausible as this conceptual temptation may be, little could be more deceptive of the actual empirical realities. To illustrate this claim, let us take a closer look at recent nationally representative survey data on embodied intercultural capital in terms of people's intercultural friendships, living experiences abroad, as well as competency in foreign and indigenous languages. The respective data stem from the *Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte* (Pöllmann / Sánchez Graillet 2015).

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of people's (lack of) living experiences abroad. As will be the case in all subsequent figures and tables, the respective survey question, answer categories, and source information feature in Spanish in order to more closely represent the corresponding original research context. Furthermore, for the remainder of this article, the answer category "NC" consistently stands for "no contestó" and the answer category "NS" for "no sabía".

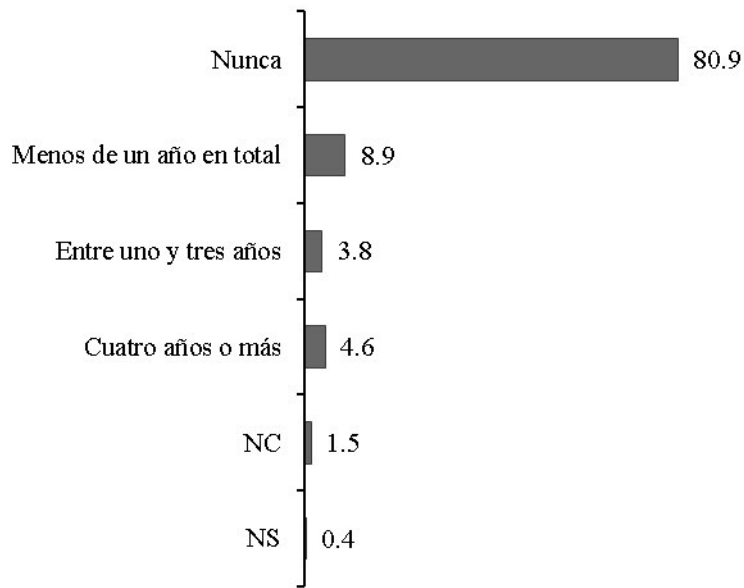


Figure 1. En total, ¿cuánto tiempo ha estado en el extranjero? (*Percentages*). Source: Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte; Los mexicanos vistos por sí mismos: Los grandes temas nacionales (n=1,200), Área de Investigación Aplicada y Opinión, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM, 2015.

As the bar chart clearly illustrates, the vast majority of respondents declared that they had never lived abroad (i.e., 80.9 per cent). Perhaps even more tellingly, the proportion of respondents with the comparatively longest living experience abroad corresponds to merely 4.6 per cent.

In table 1, we find information as to whether or not the members of our nationally representative sample indicated having (i) non-Mexican friends and (ii) Mexican friends who speak an indigenous language.

	No	Sí	NS	NC
<i>Amigos no-mexicanos</i>	61.9	25.0	6.5	6.6
<i>Amigos mexicanos que hablan una lengua indígena</i>	60.0	27.8	6.3	5.9

Table 1. Amigos no-mexicanos y amigos mexicanos que hablan una lengua indígena (*Percentages*). Source: Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte; Los mexicanos vistos por sí mismos: Los grandes temas nacionales (n=1,200), Área de Investigación Aplicada y Opinión, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM, 2015.

The corresponding results are remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, considering the fact that only one out of four respondents appears to have non-Mexican friends; and second, because the proportion of respondents who declared having Mexican friends who speak an indigenous language is only marginally higher (i.e., 27.8 per cent). Even if the data does not afford the necessary in-depth knowledge of people's actual intercultural friendships, it seems safe to infer that a substantial majority of participants in our sample have thus engaged in little or no intercultural dialogue – neither with foreigners nor with indigenous compatriots.

Figures 2 and 3 show the proportion of respondents who asserted their ability to have a basic conversation in any indigenous or foreign language respectively.

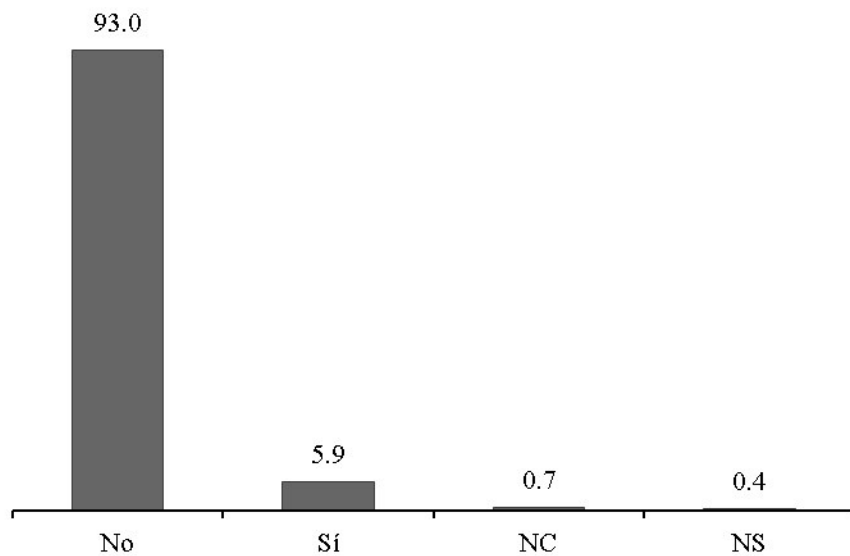


Figure 2. ¿Puede Usted tener una conversación básica en alguna lengua indígena? (*Percentages*).

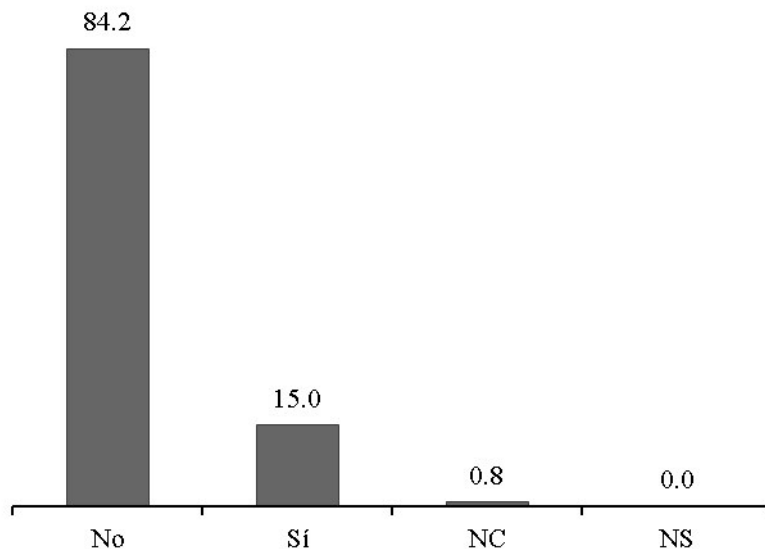


Figure 3. ¿Puede Usted tener una conversación básica en alguna lengua extranjera? (*Percentages*).

Source for figures 2 and 3: Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte; Los mexicanos vistos por sí mismos: Los grandes temas nacionales (n=1,200), Área de Investigación Aplicada y Opinión, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM, 2015.

The results are remarkable. 93.0 per cent of respondents indicated not being able to converse (albeit at a basic level) in any of the country's indigenous languages (i.e., figure 2); and 84.2 per cent of respondents regarded themselves as unable to do so in the case of foreign languages (i.e., figure 3). Although not presented graphically here, it is worth adding that the *Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte* also includes data on respondents' perceived writing skills – again in relation to both indigenous and foreign languages. The respective proportional shares closely match the auto-perceptions of conversational language competency presented in figures 2 and 3. More concretely, 93.6 per cent of respondents saw themselves unable to read a text in any of the country's indigenous languages; and 82.9 per cent said they would not be able to do so in the case of any foreign language.

If the ideological forebears and current promoters of NAFTA had a "free"-trade agreement in mind that included wider access to "intercultural exchange", than it would probably be fair to summarise that agenda item as not achieved. Whether and to what extent our examples from the field of formal education confirm or contradict these more general national trends will become clearer in the course of the two subsequent sections, beginning with the case of a qualitative grass roots evaluation of specialized intercultural primary schools that aim to address the specific needs of Mexico's rural indigenous communities.

3. Intercultural primary education from the perspective of indigenous communities

In 2011, Mexico's *Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación* declared the then customary standardized evaluation regime (i.e., ENLACE) as indirectly discriminatory of the country's pre-hispanic cultures. This declaration ultimately led to a major consultation of rural indigenous communities, known as *La Consulta Previa, Libre e Informada a Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas sobre la Evaluación Educativa* (henceforth also "The Consultation"). Under the leadership of the *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación*, The Consultation constitutes a long overdue intent to begin to "overcome" a dire history of conceptual and methodological domination and marginalization by federal and regional governments and education systems.

In many ways, the design and implementation of The Consultation represents an extraordinary multidisciplinary collegial effort. Most importantly, its conceptual and methodological approach is organic in the sense that it does not impose connotations or external

categories on a passive object of study, but allows the respective community representatives to share their experiences, concerns, proposals and suggestions in their own language and as anchored within their own cultural context and universe of sociocultural meaning. Surely, as is the case with any research project, there would remain room for further elaboration and development. For example, it is not entirely clear which proportion of those commonly less represented community members, whose participation in The Consultation was explicitly encouraged – that is the elderly, women, children and teenagers – did indeed form part of the respective community assemblies, and if so, whether or not they actually got to make themselves heard.

Based on research in 49 rural indigenous communities (from all across Mexico), the results of The Consultation consistently demonstrate the need for schools that consider, appreciate, and actively incorporate a range of values, knowledge, forms of learning, and customs that originate from the respective communities themselves. This includes strong demands for recognition and valuation of the natural environment, ancestral wisdoms, community involvement, and of how all these aspects closely relate to the cultivation and the assertive use of the respective indigenous languages. Indeed, the actual or feared loss of the mother tongue and ancestral oral histories seems to penetrate the minds and hearts of many local representatives in all 49 participating indigenous communities.

Once and again, The Consultation reveals desires for an educational system that builds on and promotes community self-determination and identity, as well as traditional forms of participation and solidarity. This implies on the one hand, the rejection of individual competitiveness and educational standards that are imposed externally and from "above" by the state and its institutions, and, on the other hand, the active involvement of families, community elders, and other important local figures and representatives. In general, The Consultation leaves no doubt that the participating indigenous communities conceive education as closely interlinked with local sociocultural life and as involving far more than just "the school", which tends to be regarded as a modern and urban institution.

Given that these key demands emerged in one way or the other in all 49 consulted rural indigenous communities, it is worth contrasting them with the curriculum of the *Licenciatura en Educación Primaria Intercultural Bilingüe* (LEPIB), which aims to prepare students for their professional lives as teachers in rural indigenous primary schools. Revising the respective curricular guidelines and study modules (SEP 2004), it quickly becomes evident that these do not convey the desired contextually situated cooperative forms of teaching and learning. Consequently, any serious attempt to meet the indigenous communities' most urgent demands

would need to imply a very significant increase in the number of teacher training programmes that value, actively promote, and transmit critical knowledge of the respective indigenous languages, cultures, and cosmovisions. Most importantly perhaps, a more socioculturally sensitive educational approach would have to include a critical understanding of both historical and present-day forms of systematic domination, marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation.

According to the curricular logic of the LEPiB, "education in and for diversity is for all inhabitants of the Mexican territory and not only for the [respective] indigenous peoples; its focus is intercultural for all and intercultural-bilingual for the country's multicultural regions" (SEP 2004: 9, *my translation*). However, the results of *La Consulta Previa, Libre e Informada a Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas sobre la Evaluación Educativa* clearly and consistently demonstrate that these objectives have not been met in the case of Mexico's indigenous communities. Moreover, as the *Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte* illustrates, large parts of Mexico's multicultural population display high levels of intercultural illiteracy, thus shedding severe doubt on any premature celebrations of *homo interculturalis* as a pervasive sociocultural phenomenon.

If we acknowledge the fact that the consulted indigenous communities reject notions of individual competitiveness and standardized discriminatory educational directives from "above" – whilst opting for more contextually situated, participatory, and solidary modes of community education – than it is difficult to imagine what NAFTA should contribute, or has thus far contributed, to the fulfilment of these desires. As we will see in the following section, a similar dose of scepticism might be adequate in the case of future secondary school teachers' (unfulfilled) dreams of intercultural education.

4. Prospective secondary school teachers' dreams of intercultural education

The third example of recent research involves a series of questions concerning initial and continuous intercultural teacher education, with a particular interest in the experiences and perceptual perspective of future Mexican secondary school teachers. Fieldwork was conducted in the last two weeks of September and the first week of October 2014 during morning shifts at the premises of the *Escuela Normal Superior de México* in Mexico City. Questionnaires were distributed to students of the *Licenciatura en Educación Secundaria* (SEP 2000). The 189 participating student teachers completed all questions fully and in accordance with the respective closed or open answer formats.

All of the 189 participants were born in Mexico and Mexican nationals exclusively (i.e., no cases of double or multiple nationality were observed). Nearly four out of five participating student teachers were female (78.3 per cent), and their average age was 21.1 years. Prior to presenting some of the most pertinent results, it should also be noted that 12 of the participants were specializing in civic and ethical education, 20 in pedagogy, 24 in history, 65 in mathematics and 68 in Spanish – which reflects the relative institutional weight of the respective subject areas in the *Escuela Normal Superior de México*.

Table 2 lists the degrees of importance that the student teachers attribute to having contact with cultures, people, teachers, and the education systems of other countries, regarding both initial and continuous teacher education.

		No es importante	Es poco importante	Es importante	Es muy importante
<i>Contacto con culturas de otros países</i>	inicial	0.5	3.2	27.5	68.8
	continua	0.5	3.7	32.3	63.5
<i>Contacto con gente de otros países</i>	inicial	0.5	4.2	33.9	61.4
	continua	0.5	5.3	33.9	60.3
<i>Contacto con maestros de otros países</i>	inicial	0.0	5.8	42.9	51.3
	continua	0.0	5.3	35.4	59.3
<i>Contacto con sistemas educativos de otros países</i>	inicial	0.0	3.7	54.5	41.8
	continua	0.0	2.6	45.0	52.4

Table 2. La importancia percibida de la formación intercultural inicial y continua de maestros (*Percentages*). Source: La formación intercultural inicial y continua de los maestros de educación obligatoria desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de la Escuela Normal Superior de México (n=189), Dr. Andreas Pöllmann, Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, UNAM, 2014.

As table 2 illustrates, the overwhelming majority of our sample of future secondary school teachers assigns high levels of importance to an initial and continuous teacher education that provides a range of intercultural learning opportunities. In fact, the proportional shares of the answer categories "important" and "very important" combined range from a minimum of 94.2 per cent (for contact with other people and teachers) to a maximum of 97.4 per cent (in the case of contact with other education systems).

In addition, figure 4 provides information on the student teachers' interest in participating in an international exchange programme, considering Spanish speaking as well as non-Spanish speaking countries and using an open answer format.

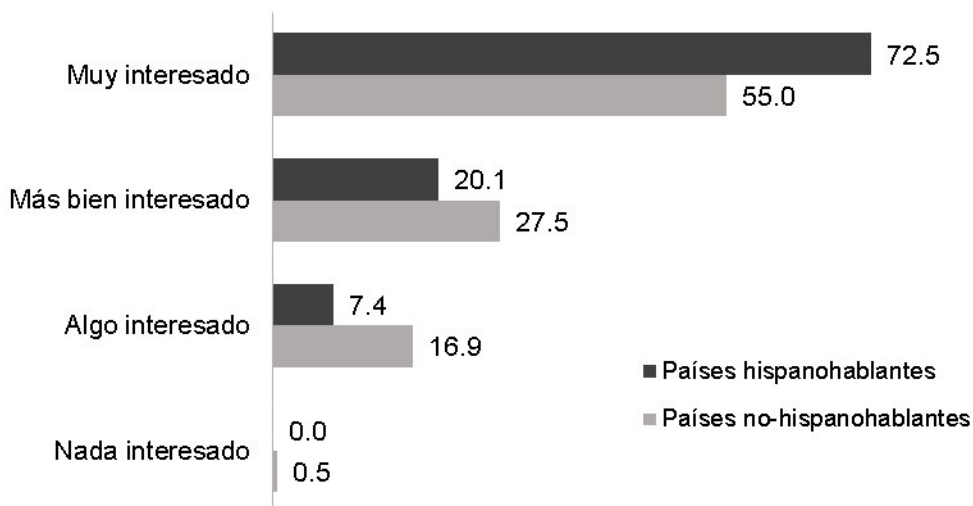


Figure 4. El interés por participar en algún programa de intercambio internacional, considerando países hispanohablantes y países no-hispanohablantes (*Percentages*). Source: La formación intercultural inicial y continua de los maestros de educación obligatoria desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de la Escuela Normal Superior de México (n=189), Dr. Andreas Pöllmann, Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, UNAM, 2014.

Rather impressively, the accumulated shares for the answer categories "interested" and "very interested" correspond to 92.6 per cent in the case of Spanish speaking countries and to 82.5 per cent in the case of non-Spanish speaking countries. Overall, the results in figure 4 confirm the high levels of importance ascribed to intercultural contact during initial and continuous teacher education.

The results in table 3 illustrate once more the perceived importance (i.e., arithmetic means) of intercultural teacher education, complemented by information on the perceived importance of practical intercultural experiences in indigenous communities. The student teachers were asked to rate both items on an eleven-point-scale where the lowest value "1" stands for "not important at all" and the highest value "11" for "very important".

	Formación inicial	Formación continua
<i>Importancia de temas Interculturales</i>	10.1	10.2
<i>Importancia de prácticas profesionales en comunidades indígenas</i>	9.8	9.8
En escala del 1 al 11, en donde 1 es "nada importante" y 11 es "muy importante"		

Table 3. Importancia atribuida a la incorporación de temas interculturales y prácticas profesionales en comunidades indígenas en la formación magisterial inicial y continua (*Means*). Source: La formación intercultural inicial y continua de los maestros de educación obligatoria desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de la Escuela Normal Superior de México (n=189), Dr. Andreas Pöllmann, Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, UNAM, 2014.

To contextualize the results for professional practices in indigenous communities, it is worth mentioning that when answering other related survey questions – whose detailed discussion would lie beyond the scope of the present article – the vast majority of future secondary school teachers rated the presence of indigenous communities as positive for Mexico, whilst recognizing their marginalization in Mexican society. In the end, the high levels of importance ascribed to professional practices in indigenous communities remind us of the demands raised by the community representatives who participated in *La Consulta Previa, Libre e Informada a Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas sobre la Evaluación Educativa* – and underline the need for more institutional and governmental commitment in this area.

As table 4 shows, the student teachers' actual intercultural experiences fall far short of the high levels of importance which they attributed to different forms of intercultural contact as part of both initial and continuous teacher education. They also fail to come anything near their

high levels of interest in participating in international exchange programmes for (prospective) teachers.

	Nunca	En una ocasión	En más de una ocasión
<i>Nivel de contacto con maestros Visitantes del extranjero [desde ingreso a la ENSM]</i>	86.2	12.7	1.1
<i>Participación en programas de intercambio internacional [desde su educación básica]</i>	98.9	1.1	0.0

Table 4. Experiencias de educación/formación intercultural vividas (*Percentages*). Source: La formación intercultural inicial y continua de los maestros de educación obligatoria desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de la Escuela Normal Superior de México (n=189), Dr. Andreas Pöllmann, Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, UNAM, 2014.

In fact, only an extremely small proportion of the surveyed student teachers had thus far had the opportunity to meet a visiting teacher from abroad, and even fewer had been able to participate in any international exchange programme. However, rather than coming as a surprise, the unfulfilled dreams of our sample of future secondary school teachers remind us of the epidemic levels of intercultural illiteracy – properly identified and illustrated in the context of the recent *Encuesta Nacional de Cultura, Lectura y Deporte*.

Whilst it is important to emphasize that the survey of student teachers from Mexico City involved a non-statistically representative sample of only 189 participants, their respective individual perceptions, attitudes, and expectations reveal important frustrations that are symptomatic of a more general lack of intercultural learning opportunities. Considering the formative potential of teachers, their frustrations should constitute a wake-up-call for governments, institutions, and policy makers. In their own right, but also in the joint context of all three research projects presented in the course of this article, they emphasize the urgent need to generate opportunities for intercultural capital realization – both inside the national territory and globally. That said, the role of international cooperation frameworks such as NAFTA constitutes a controversial subject that leads us to revisit and expand on some earlier points by way of conclusion.

5. Conclusion: a long road to more intercultural literacy

Our nationally representative survey data revealed low overall levels of intercultural capital realization in terms of acquisition and application (i.e., concerning language skills and personal intercultural living experiences). For lack of commensurable data, it is impossible to contextualize these results for Mexico with comparable findings for Canada and the USA. Yet, in view of the global dominance of English as business and educational language, it is unlikely that proportionately more Canadians or US Americans speak a foreign language than Mexican's do. Whether comparatively more Canadians or US Americans speak any of the respective countries' native languages or maintain more intercultural friendships would also appear debatable – and particularly so when controlling for people's ethno-racial background, socio-economic status, family circumstances, and level of formal education.

What we can learn from the case of rural Mexican indigenous communities is that local demands for alternative forms of intercultural cooperation that value community solidarity over individualistic competition ought to be taken seriously. To reiterate an earlier point, any sincere attempt to meet the indigenous communities' most urgent demands would need to imply a very significant increase in the number of teacher training programmes that value, actively promote, and transmit critical knowledge of the respective indigenous languages, cultures, and cosmovisions. Whether and to what extent international "free"-trade agreements such as NAFTA will in the future be able and willing to address these concerns, and to adapt their underlying neoliberal market philosophy accordingly, remains to be seen.

In a similar vein, the case of student teachers from the *Escuela Normal Superior de México* can help us appreciate the need for more intercultural learning opportunities in initial and continuous secondary teacher education. As previously stated, the respective findings emphasize the urgency for more intercultural educational exchange both inside the national territory and internationally. A renewed or more decisive commitment by governments, institutions, and policy makers could stimulate the multidimensional realization of intercultural capital, which may in turn contribute to the creation and amplification of more sustainable forms of "free"-trade that actually form part of people's life worlds – including those of the continent's indigenous communities. Then again, looking back at the past two decades and a half, such a scenario might prove to be overly optimistic.

The present contribution did not set out to provide an evaluation of NAFTA and its "free"-trade-ideology; nor did it pretend to offer a contribution to the critique of neoliberal globalization and the mercantilization of formal education, as others have done so compellingly (e.g., Connell 2013; Giroux 2004; Hill 2009; Klees 2008; Mayo 2015; Torres 2009). However,

the article nonetheless raises important questions for all those interested in alternative forms of intercultural cooperation that convey a vision beyond narrowly instrumental business objectives. Without such sociocultural change, the realization of intercultural capital as well as access to intercultural exchange will continue to constitute a tangible reality (or prospective) for the few rather than the many – within fields of formal education and beyond.

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