

Experiences and challenges of guarijío students at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México

Experiencias y desafíos del estudiantado guarijío en la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México

Ana María Neyoy Valenzuela

Unidad Mochicahui. Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México.
amarianeyoy@uaim.edu.mx

Denisse Muñoz Asseff

Coordinación General de investigación y Postgrado. Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2897-7334>
carmencarmenmunoz@hotmail.com

Cite: Neyoy, A., Muñoz, D. (2025). Experiencias y desafíos del estudiantado guarijío en la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México. *Mujer Andina*, 4(1), e040102. <https://doi.org/10.36881/ma.v4i1.1134>

Mujer Andina, Julio - Diciembre 2025, Vol. 4(1)

Abstract

This research aims to analyze the challenges faced by guarijío students when entering and remaining at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM). Through a qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten students and two faculty members, various issues were identified that hinder the academic trajectory of guarijío students. Among the main challenges are precarious economic conditions, limited support infrastructure, the geographical distance between their home communities and the university, as well as cultural and linguistic discrimination. However, the testimonies also reveal strategies of resistance and resilience developed by the students themselves, such as family support, community organization, and the creation of solidarity networks within the university environment. The findings suggest that, despite adversity, the presence of guarijío students at UAIM represents an act of collective agency that challenges the persistent structures of exclusion in higher education. In conclusion, the study highlights the need to implement public policies aimed at equity, such as access to scholarships, academic support programs, and the incorporation of intercultural approaches into curricula, in order to ensure a more inclusive, relevant, and transformative higher education for Indigenous peoples in Mexico.

Keywords: intercultural education, guarijíos, higher education, educational experiences.



Autor de correspondencia
Ana María Neyoy Valenzuela

Sin conflicto de interés

Received: 17/05/2025

Reviewed: 19/06/2025

Accepted: 25/06/2025

Published: 30/07/2025

Resumen

La presente investigación tiene como objetivo analizar las experiencias y desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes guarijíos al ingresar y permanecer en la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM). A través de una investigación cualitativa basada en entrevistas semiestructuradas aplicadas a ocho estudiantes y tres docentes, se identificaron diversas problemáticas que dificultan la trayectoria académica del estudiantado guarijío. Entre los principales desafíos se encuentran las condiciones económicas precarias, la limitada infraestructura de apoyo, la distancia geográfica entre sus comunidades de origen y la universidad, así como la discriminación cultural y lingüística. No obstante, los testimonios también revelan estrategias de resistencia y resiliencia desarrolladas por los propios estudiantes, como el apoyo familiar, la organización comunitaria y la construcción de redes solidarias dentro del entorno universitario. Los resultados sugieren que, a pesar de las adversidades, la presencia guarijía en la UAIM representa un ejercicio de agencia colectiva que desafía las estructuras de exclusión persistentes en la educación superior. En conclusión, se subraya la necesidad de implementar políticas públicas orientadas a la equidad, como el acceso a becas, programas de acompañamiento académico y la incorporación de enfoques interculturales en los planes de estudio, con el fin de garantizar una educación superior más inclusiva, pertinente y transformadora para los pueblos indígenas de México.

Palabras clave: educación intercultural, guarijíos, educación superior, experiencias educativas.

Introduction

Indigenous education is conceptualized as a pedagogical process that acknowledges, respects, and promotes the cultures, languages, and ancestral knowledge of Indigenous peoples (Martínez, 2015). This model seeks not only to strengthen the cultural identity of Indigenous students but also to equip them with the tools necessary for active participation in contemporary society. In recent decades, numerous studies have indicated a significant global increase in Indigenous higher education, driven by movements advocating for cultural recognition, the implementation of intercultural public policies, and the establishment of Indigenous or intercultural universities (Schmelkes, 2018; Dietz & Mateos, 2020). However, substantial structural challenges persist, with one of the most prominent being the precarious economic conditions of Indigenous communities, which restrict educational opportunities for their youth. In Mexico, despite the development of policies recognizing cultural diversity, the access

and retention rates of Indigenous students at the university level remain inequitable. According to recent studies, the majority of Indigenous students originate from marginalized areas, lack sufficient financial support, and confront obstacles stemming from discrimination, structural racism, and a lack of cultural relevance in curricula (Mendoza & Hamel, 2022; López Gopar, 2019).

In this context, the present research focuses on analyzing the experiences and challenges faced by Guarijío students at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM). The UAIM is an institution specifically established to democratize access to higher education through an intercultural approach. Despite its institutional efforts, the UAIM continues to present significant barriers that impede the full academic development of students from Indigenous communities. The Guarijío population, characterized by its strong community ties, distinct language, and territorial isolation,

experiences a complex educational transition upon entering the formal university system.

These issues align with those observed more broadly in Mexico concerning Indigenous students under structures of educational inequality. Avena (2017) highlights that “Indigenous populations are victims of structural inequality,” which manifests in communicative and institutional gaps. Similarly, Schmelkes (2008) emphasizes that intercultural universities, even those with an inclusive mission, still confront “incomplete identity transformations” and manifestations of interethnic racism within Mexican campuses.

These challenges manifest as high levels of stress, low academic performance, school dropout rates, and limited participation in extracurricular activities. At a structural level, the underrepresentation of Indigenous students, such as the Guarijío, highlights an outstanding debt in terms of educational inclusion. Various studies concur that the economic difficulties faced by Indigenous students stem from a complex interplay of historical and social factors, including: Internal colonialism, Structural exclusion, Absence of effective differentiated support policies (Reygadas, 2021; Dietz, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of institutional programs sensitive to cultural diversity perpetuates inequity, negatively impacting not only individual academic performance but also the social and cultural fabric of their communities of origin.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to a deep diagnosis of the barriers faced by Guarijío students. This not only helps to make their experiences visible but also allows for the proposal of concrete strategies to strengthen their inclusion and retention in the university. At the educational level, it contributes to the design of institutional policies with an intercultural focus; while in the cultural sphere, it allows for the revalorization of Guarijío linguistic richness and worldview as fundamental elements of a truly plural and transformative education. Thus, it is recognized that guaranteeing the right to equitable higher education for Indigenous peoples is not only a matter of social justice but also a way

to enrich the Mexican educational system as a whole.

To deeply understand the reality of Guarijío students at the UAIM, a qualitative research approach was employed. This involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eight students and three faculty members. This instrument allowed for the exploration of students’ experiences, perceptions, and challenges, as well as the strategies they implement to overcome the difficulties they encounter. The findings from this research will help identify the main barriers hindering the academic success of Guarijío students in order to propose concrete actions to improve their study conditions and promote their retention at the university.

Intercultural Education in Mexico

In Mexico, interculturality is shaped by the confluence of diverse traditions and perspectives. While indigenism has historically been influential, molding intercultural policies and practices, multiple approaches coexist today. On one hand, essentialist views of culture and identity persist, tending to homogenize Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, broader notions of interculturality are emerging, seeking to include diverse social and cultural groups. This diversity of approaches generates a complex and dynamic debate regarding the most suitable models, concepts, and practices for promoting interculturality in education. As Montoya (2020) warns, in the post-indigenist Mexican context, “interculturality subsumes or reconverts the post-indigenist debate,” evidencing tensions between past welfare-oriented visions and proposals for genuine intercultural dialogue.

From this perspective, Figueroa (2016) argues that, based on the continuous efforts and achievements of Mexico’s Indigenous population, a new landscape, full of promise and hope, is emerging in the 21st century. This includes the realization of dreams through the creation of intercultural universities, the promulgation of the General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2003, and the attempts by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) to improve the selection process-

es for Indigenous teachers. All of these factors contribute to the current recognition of national languages, which in turn requires addressing the challenges of a global society through meaningful dialogue and respect for intercultural diversity.

In this sense, Cruz (2015) asserts that in Mexico, the government ostensibly champions “intercultural education” as a protective measure for minority groups. This involves maintaining political promises and rhetoric with seemingly good intentions in education and pedagogy. However, in reality, these educational institutions grapple with the problematization of exclusion and discrimination against multiple and diverse social identities, which are a product of globalization. Consequently, the intercultural school finds itself at a crossroads between government actions and the theoretical proposals of researchers, social activists, and broad Indigenous movements. This is because education implicitly embodies a conceptualization of the human being in society that is often shaped by the interests of hegemonic groups.

For a genuine intercultural relationship to flourish within these educational institutions, students must coexist and engage in a shared space of active interaction built on respect, equality, and acceptance of others for their differences, leading to highly enriching outcomes (Schmelkes, 2013).

It’s important to remember that the agreements between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the federal government in 1996 spurred the creation of intercultural universities, a form of education demanded by Indigenous peoples. This was intended to motivate cultural reinvindication processes. However, over the past decade, foci of control from federal governmental powers have silently infiltrated these institutions (Ávila and Ávila, 2014). This development is inconsistent with the meaning of intercultural education, which aims to provide quality education without admitting asymmetries. Guided by an appropriate path that identifies cultural groups and the context of the mestizo population, education must be for everyone. If it’s not for all, it’s not interculturality (Schmelkes, 2013).

Originally, the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) was established to contribute to community development and to bring higher education closer to Indigenous communities in Northwestern Sinaloa, without precluding the inclusion of Indigenous youth from other states by providing them with housing and dining facilities. One of the initial problems it faced was a lack of federal government budget, as the project did not align with other university systems or subsystems. Consequently, in 2005, it became part of the subsystem of intercultural universities (Guerra, 2004).

Sáez (2006) argues that to educate is to transform, modify, and develop. Therefore, to educate interculturality is to foster the construction of a shared reality of coexistence, where no one feels they possess the sole and universal truth. In this way, education serves to modify attitudes regarding cultural diversity and to review and transform our own cultural components.

Research Context: The Guarijío Community

The Guarijío, an Indigenous people with a rich history and culture, inhabit the rugged Sierra Madre Occidental, in a region spanning parts of the states of Sonora and Chihuahua (see Figure 1). This community, divided into two main groups—the Warihó of Chihuahua and the Macurawe of Sonora—has maintained a close relationship with its natural environment, developing agricultural, hunting, and gathering practices adapted to the region’s conditions (González, 2010).

The political division between Chihuahua and Sonora, as noted by Vélez and Harris (2004), has significantly impacted the Guarijío’s lives, fragmenting their territory and affecting their social and cultural dynamics. Despite this division, the Guarijío have managed to preserve many aspects of their identity, including their language, religious beliefs, and traditions.

Throughout their history, the Guarijío have faced various challenges such as Spanish colonization, land loss, and discrimination. However, they

have demonstrated great adaptability and resilience. Currently, many Guarijío combine their traditional practices with elements of Mestizo culture, which has fostered a rich cultural diversity (González, 2010).

Nonetheless, the Guarijío continue to face significant challenges, including poverty, limited access to basic services, discrimination, and the loss of their mother tongue. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of recognition of their rights and scarce investment in community development programs (González, 2010).

The Guarijíos primarily inhabit the municipalities of Alamos and Quiriego, Sonora, bordering Chihuahua. Their population is dispersed across various communities, such as Mesa Colorada, Bavícora, and Guajaray, adapting to the region's geographical conditions. Some Guarijío families also reside in San Bernardo, where they have formed settlements like Makurague and Los Jacales (INPI, 2020).

This Indigenous group shares historical antecedents with both the native groups of the North Amer-

ican Southwest (Hopi, Comanche, Ute, Apache, Navajo, and the "Pueblo" Indians), and with the contemporary Mayos (Yoreme), Pápagos (Tohono O'odham), Pimas (O'ob), Tarahumaras (Rarámuri), Tepehuanos (Odami), Seris (Comcáac), and Yaquis (Yoeme). Furthermore, for many years, territorial disputes occurred with other currently extinct ethnic groups, including the Baborigamis, Baciroas, Conícaris, Chínipas, Guailopopos, Guazapares, Husarones, Macoyagüis, Tubares, Yecorames, and Zoes (Cruz, 2018).

The Guarijío's territorial unity was disrupted following the arrival of Spanish missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries. While the first contacts with Europeans date back to 1530, according to Haro et al. (1996), it was in 1588 when the first formal record of the Guarijíos was made during an expedition by Diego Martin de Hurdaide through the Sierra de Chínipas.

They were initially concentrated in Chínipas, Chihuahua (Penagos, 2004); however, the Guarijíos later suffered a drastic reduction in their territory and population after the death of Jesuit mis-

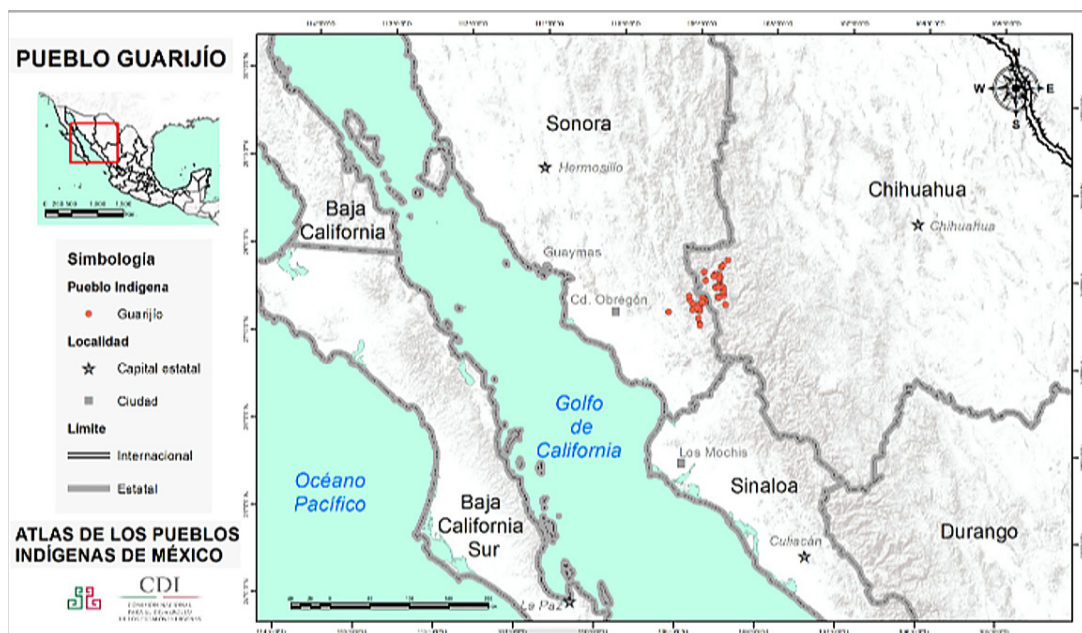


Figure 1. Map of the Guarijío region

Note: Atlas of the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico. National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI, 2020)

sionaries. After being persecuted and massacred, they were forced to seek refuge in the mountains or intermingle with other Indigenous groups such as the Mayos and Tarahumaras. This forced diaspora led to the dispersion of the Guarijíos and the dialectal division of their language, with one part settling in Sonora.

Currently, the Guarijíos of Chihuahua and Sonora combine traditional activities such as agriculture and livestock farming. The latter represents the primary economic activity, while seasonal agriculture and the gathering of wild products are important but to a lesser extent. Based on information from Vélez and Harris (2004), they cultivate corn, beans, squash, and vegetables on the hillsides, complementing their subsistence with livestock raising.

On the other hand, the Sierra or Northern Guarijío variant is concentrated mainly in the Chihuahua municipalities of Moris, Chínipas, and Uruachi, with a significant nucleus in the communities around Arechuyvo (Miller, 1996) and Loreto. Meanwhile, the River or Southern Guarijío variant is distributed in scattered settlements throughout the Sierra de Álamos, Sonora, with prominent localities such as La Mesa Colorada, Bavícora, and Guajaray (Penagos, 2004). A more detailed catalog of the locations where Guarijío is spoken in both states is presented by the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI, 2008).

The Guarijío maintain a deep connection with their natural environment, which is reflected in their crafts. Using materials such as palm, clay, and plant fibers, they create a wide variety of objects for daily and ceremonial use, including baskets, mats, hats, and carrying frames. In San Bernardo, Sonora, notable items include pascola masks and wood carvings representing the rich local fauna. Furthermore, their musical prowess is evident in the fabrication of instruments like harps, violins, and guitars. This artisanal production, primarily undertaken by women, is an expression of their cultural identity and a means of subsistence. Their festivities, such as the tuburada and cava-pisca, are moments of celebration and gratitude where

music, dance, and religion intertwine, showcasing their worldview and connection to the land.

The educational attainment level of the Guarijío population reveals a concerning issue. There is a predominance of individuals who have not completed primary education, particularly at the lowest educational levels. This reality raises questions about the educational opportunities accessible to members of this Indigenous community (INEGI, 2015).

Gender inequality, while not abysmal, is also present in the data. Guarijío women, on average, exhibit slightly lower educational levels than men. This indicates the persistence of gender gaps in access to education (INEGI, 2015).

Various factors explain this situation. Among them are unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, the remoteness of educational centers, a lack of economic resources, and the need to work from an early age to contribute to family sustenance. Additionally, cultural and linguistic factors, such as the priority given to community traditions, as well as the lack of educational materials in their mother tongue, can hinder the adaptation of Guarijío students to the formal educational system.

It's important to highlight that education is a fundamental human right, and educational exclusion has long-term negative consequences for both individuals and communities. A low educational attainment level is associated with fewer job opportunities, higher poverty rates, and reduced participation in political and social life.

These effects are also evident among the Guarijío. Although they are an Indigenous people with a rich history and culture, they have faced multiple adversities throughout their history. Despite being represented by governors and having an organizational structure promoted by indigenist groups since the late 1970s, they have been marginalized and forgotten for a long time. Consequently, their traditions, beliefs, and ways of life have been threatened, forcing them to fight for their survival (Aguilar, 1996).

The living conditions of the Guarijío community are extremely difficult; poverty and marginalization are part of their daily lives. The rugged geography of their territory, the scarcity of natural resources, and the lack of basic services like potable water and electricity severely limit their development possibilities. Nevertheless, despite these adversities, the Guarijío have managed to adapt to their environment and build a rich culture based on a deep connection with nature (Yetman, 2002).

This is because the Guarijío homeland is in the Sierra de Álamos-Río Cuchujaqui, a territory located in a transition zone between desert and tropical ecosystems, whose biological importance stands out. As a result, it has been recognized as a Protected Area for Wild Flora and Fauna and Aquatic Life due to its rich biodiversity (Salazar and Salido, 1996).

The Guarijío are a resilient people who have managed to survive and maintain their cultural identity despite the challenges they have faced. Their close relationship with nature and their ability to adapt to an adverse environment are an example of Mexico's cultural richness and diversity. However, it's crucial to continue working to improve their living conditions and ensure respect for their rights and cultural heritage.

Methodology

This research is framed within a qualitative approach, aimed at deeply understanding the experiences and challenges faced by Guarijío students at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM). A descriptive and exploratory design was employed, which allows for capturing the perceptions, lived experiences, and sociocultural contexts of the participants, as well as identifying the barriers and facilitating factors in their academic trajectory.

The research type is qualitative, with an interpretative approach that prioritizes the subjective understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the actors involved themselves. To achieve this, ethnographic and phenomenological methods were utilized, allowing for a detailed

examination of the educational reality of Indigenous students. The procedures included conducting in-depth interviews with themes focused on interculturality and higher education, applied to a purposive sample comprising eight Guarijío students and three faculty members linked to the UAIM. The sample selection was non-probabilistic and directed, considering criteria of cultural representativeness, gender diversity, and academic trajectory, in order to capture a variety of significant experiences for analysis. The interviews were conducted in person in the communities between May 5 and June 20, 2024.

The techniques applied were semi-structured interviews and participant observation, which facilitated the collection of rich and contextualized data. The data obtained were analyzed through thematic coding, identifying recurrent patterns and emerging categories that support the study's conclusions.

Results

The Guarijío Students' Experience at UAIM

An analysis of the Guarijío students' experiences at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) reveals a complex intersection of cultural, socioeconomic, and educational factors that decisively influence their academic trajectory. Firstly, it's crucial to acknowledge technological and infrastructural barriers as tangible obstacles limiting both access to and retention in higher education. Vicente Vega Verdugo, a teacher at the Mesa Colorada Telebachillerato, clearly articulates this issue, stating that "working in the fields, walking long distances, and climbing hills in search of an internet signal are sacrifices young Guarijío people make to study" (V. Verdugo, personal communication, June 20, 2024). This testimony highlights not only the difficulties inherent in the physical environment but also the lack of essential technological resources for learning in the current educational model, exacerbating the digital divide and limiting equal academic opportunities.

Additionally, the experience of cultural and social adaptation emerges as a substantial challenge in the educational process. Elisa Saila Rodríguez describes the adverse conditions of her environment, where “without buses in my community, without internet access, without computers or television, adapting to the new study modality was almost impossible, but my dreams keep me steadfast” (E. Rodríguez, personal communication, May 5, 2024). This testimony underscores the dual dimension of the challenge: on one hand, the material precariousness that hinders academic continuity; on the other, the psychological and emotional impact of integrating into a university environment that represents a world distant from their community reality. The disconnection between their original context and the new educational space can generate feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and insecurity, as also expressed by Olga Delia Yoquivo and Dora Lizeth Rodríguez, who experienced fear and sadness upon separating from their families and confronting new cultures and social dynamics. However, both acknowledge that financial support, such as scholarships, and family emotional support have been crucial in sustaining their university attendance.

Furthermore, the persistence of discriminatory practices and cultural prejudices within the educational environment adds an additional layer of complexity to the experiences of Indigenous students. Bernardo Rodríguez Bacasegua recounts a particularly revealing situation regarding the lack of intercultural sensitivity, stating that some teachers “told us we weren’t entering a cantina, that we should dress properly, and that made us uncomfortable” (B. Rodríguez, personal communication, June 10, 2024). This kind of attitude not only violates students’ dignity but also limits their sense of belonging and self-esteem, which are key factors for academic success. Institutionalized marginalization in certain educational practices highlights the need to strengthen intercultural training for teaching and administrative staff, as well as to promote inclusive environments that respect and value diverse cultural identities.

In contrast to these difficulties, the analysis of the testimonies reveals a remarkable dimension of

resilience and commitment to cultural identity among young Guarijío people. José Flavio Cautivo clearly expresses the tension between the dominance of the majority language and the preservation of his mother tongue, stating that “being Guarijío is a source of pride... they want to see us as puppets, they want us to lose our language, but I seek to strengthen it” (J. Cautivo, personal communication, May 30, 2024). This statement underscores the importance of the university space as a potential realm for identity reaffirmation and cultural resistance against acculturation processes that could lead to the loss of ancestral knowledge and original languages. Intercultural education, therefore, is not only a matter of inclusion but also a vital strategy for cultural survival and the construction of relevant community projects.

Likewise, the gender issue emerges as a vulnerability factor that adds complexity to the panorama. L. Rodríguez exemplifies the cultural and social pressures that limit female educational aspirations within the Guarijío community by stating that “in Guarijío culture, women should only form a family, but I like to study... My family criticizes me and doesn’t believe in my dreams” (L. Rodríguez, personal communication, June 12, 2024). This testimony shows how traditional gender roles constitute an additional barrier that restricts Indigenous women’s opportunities for personal and professional development, deepening structural inequalities and perpetuating dynamics of exclusion. In this way, higher education presents itself to them not only as a learning space but also as a realm of struggle against cultural prejudices and stereotypes.

The accounts from other students, such as C. Zazueta and R. Rodríguez, broaden this perspective by showing that difficulties are not limited to adaptation or discrimination; they also include economic constraints and the absence of sufficient institutional support. C. Zazueta acknowledges that the lack of financial resources to cover school expenses and the experience of daily discrimination create a climate of uncertainty and vulnerability that threatens their academic continuity. Meanwhile, R. Rodríguez emphasizes the decisive role of fam-

ily support in overcoming the distance and fears associated with entering university: “They told me they trusted me, that I should really apply myself to my studies, that I should finish my degree so I could have a better future” (R. Rodríguez, personal communication, June 20, 2024). This intersection between material resources and social support networks highlights the complexity of factors influencing educational success.

Finally, interviews with faculty members like M. Soto and coordinators like V. Vega provide insight into the positive impact of academic training on Indigenous communities themselves. Vega stresses that the first generation of Guarijío students is setting a precedent that motivates new cohorts: “The vanguard that the first generation created motivated the others” (V. Verdugo, personal communication, June 20, 2024). However, it is also acknowledged that only a small number manage to complete their studies, reflecting that structural barriers persist and that public policies and support programs need to be strengthened to increase this number.

The experiences of Guarijío students at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) reflect a reality shared by various Indigenous peoples in Latin America and other regions of the world. International studies have documented how Indigenous students face similar structural barriers: poverty, discrimination, cultural displacement, and a lack of educational relevance (Restoule et al., 2013; Brayboy et al., 2015). In countries like Canada, for example, Restoule et al. (2013) highlight that First Nations students face the dilemma of leaving their communities to access university, which implies not only geographical separation but also cultural and emotional uprooting. This phenomenon is closely related to what young Guarijío people like Elisa or Celia experience, as they face family and community ruptures, in addition to significant economic and emotional barriers.

Similarly, in New Zealand, the Māori people have shown how universities can be hostile spaces when they do not consider Indigenous epistemol-

ogies and ways of life. According to Smith (2012), higher education must transform to incorporate not only Indigenous students but also their own conceptual frameworks, languages, and pedagogies. This connects with the criticism from J. Cautivo and R. Rodríguez regarding the lack of cultural representation and the dominant use of Spanish in university content and dynamics in Mexico.

In Bolivia, the Indigenous Intercultural University model has been studied as a pioneering experience in cultural and linguistic integration within higher education. As Rojas (2017) suggests, a truly intercultural university must incorporate ancestral knowledge, community governance, and strong ties to their territories. In contrast, although the UAIM offers logistical support such as housing, scholarships, and dining facilities, the testimonies of the Guarijío students show that a disconnect still persists between their cultural realities and the academic curriculum.

In Australia, Nakata et al. (2012) warn that Aboriginal students often grapple with a university system that evaluates them under standards alien to their cultural context, leading to exclusion. This phenomenon also occurs at the UAIM, where, despite its intercultural nature, evaluation and content remain mediated by hegemonic forms of knowledge. Therefore, Nakata’s proposal for pedagogies based on cultural negotiation is pertinent for improving the performance and retention of young Guarijío people.

Finally, in the Colombian case, according to López and Rojas (2016), universities that admit Indigenous students without adequate intercultural institutional preparation ultimately reproduce the same logics of exclusion that these communities face in other spheres. This is also evident in the collected testimonies, where students like Bernardo Rodríguez report acts of discrimination from teachers, even in institutions that define themselves as Indigenous or intercultural.

Collectively, these international studies reveal that the obstacles faced by Indigenous youth in higher education are part of a global pattern of ex-

clusion. The experience of Guarijío students at the UAIM must be understood within this framework, which reinforces the urgency of implementing differential policies designed from and with the communities themselves. This implies rethinking the content, pedagogical practices, and institutional structure of universities so that they not only welcome Indigenous students but also transform themselves from their foundations towards a real, decolonial, and participatory interculturality.

In Table 1, it can be observed how the academic performance and retention of Guarijío students at UAIM are conditioned by a complex web of structural, cultural, and emotional factors. Technological barriers and a lack of educational infrastructure exacerbate exclusion in rural contexts, while cultural adaptation processes generate displacement, insecurity, and identity tension. This is compounded by discriminatory practices that still persist in academic spaces that claim to be intercultural.

Nevertheless, in the face of these adversities, Guarijío students demonstrate forms of resistance and cultural affirmation, especially in the defense of their language and community belonging. The university thus becomes an ambivalent space that can both reinforce homogenization and strengthen identity and political agency. Particularly significant is the experience of Guarijío women, who face double exclusion due to ethnic and gender reasons, highlighting the urgent need for university policies with an intersectional approach.

While existing institutional support represents progress, it remains insufficient if it is not accompanied by deeper structural changes. The family network emerges as crucial support, demonstrating that education is a collective and communal process. In this sense, the testimonies collected invite to rethink about the intercultural university role as a space that welcomes Indigenous peoples and transforms alongside them.

Table 1.

Matrix of Factors Influencing the Academic Trajectory of Guarijío Students at UAIM: Obstacles, Resistance, and Support

Dimension Analyzed	Representative Testimony	Implications
Technological and infrastructure barriers	V. Verdugo: "Walking long distances and climbing hills in search of a signal"	It reinforces the digital divide; limits access to virtual platforms and classes.
Cultural and emotional adaptation	E. Rodríguez: "Adapting to the new way of studying was almost impossible"	It generates insecurity and anxiety; hinders a sense of belonging at university.
Cultural discrimination and prejudice	B. Rodríguez: "They told us we weren't entering a bar"	It limits emotional and academic well-being; perpetuates cultural exclusion.
Resilience and cultural identity	J. Cautivo: "Being Guarijío is a source of pride... they want us to lose our language"	It strengthens ethnic and linguistic identity as a form of resistance.
Gender status and education	L. Rodríguez: "In my culture, a woman should only form a family"	It increases access barriers for women; reinforces restrictive traditional roles.
Economic limitations	C. Zazueta: "I don't have money... I have a hard time printing school supplies"	It threatens school retention; increases the risk of dropping out.
Family and institutional support networks	R. Rodríguez: "They told me they believed in me, that I should finish my degree"	It constitutes a protective factor against dropping out of school; it strengthens self-esteem.
Transformative role of higher education	V. Verdugo: "The first generation motivated the others"	It functions as an engine of community change and an intergenerational example.

Conclusions

This study illuminates the significant challenges and experiences faced by Guarijío students upon entering and striving to persist in their studies at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM). The findings reveal the intricate nature of this situation, which is intrinsically linked to historical processes of inequity and systemic discrimination against Indigenous peoples within the Mexican context.

Guarijío students, originating from communities with low development indices and confronting linguistic and cultural barriers, are placed in a disadvantageous position compared to their non-Indigenous peers. The scarcity of economic resources, discrimination, and culture shock directly impact their academic performance and emotional well-being. These findings corroborate the relevance of applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to analyze inequality in educational access and success.

It is fundamental to acknowledge that these challenges are not merely individual but are products of social and political structures that perpetuate inequality. Higher education, rather than serving as a space for social mobility, becomes a site for the reproduction of existing disparities. Nevertheless, this research also uncovers the resilience and determination of Guarijío students, who, despite adversities, strive to achieve their academic goals.

As previously mentioned, the narratives gathered through interviews with Guarijío students at UAIM reveal a complex web of realities characterized by socioeconomic obstacles (such as a lack of monetary resources), cultural challenges (the need to leave their communities), and linguistic barriers (the language divide). Despite the adaptive challenges they experience when integrating into a different educational context and the apprehensions linked to potential discriminatory practices, these young individuals exhibit remarkable perseverance and an ability to overcome adversity in pursuing their educational objectives and maintaining their university enrollment. This

is largely due to factors such as family support, scholarships, and the opportunity to study at an institution that promotes interculturalism.

Guarijío identity plays a central role in the lives of these students, who express profound pride in their roots and their mother tongue. Despite the challenges, most of them believe that their time at the university has allowed them to strengthen their identity and acquire the necessary tools to contribute to the development of their communities.

It is important to highlight that, while the university has provided a space for intercultural encounter and learning, challenges related to discrimination and racism still persist. The lack of recognition and valuing of Indigenous cultures within the academic sphere continues to be a barrier for many students.

It's therefore significant to consider implementing multiple initiatives and support mechanisms that can substantially favor their admission, continuity, and educational permanence within the university setting. Implementing support programs, granting scholarships and financial aid, curricular inclusion, strengthening community networks, in addition to intercultural education, are some of the actions that can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable higher education for Indigenous students.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in curricula, the training of faculty and administrative staff in intercultural issues, and the establishment of support networks among Indigenous students are fundamental actions to create a more respectful and welcoming educational environment. A top priority is for higher education institutions to collaborate with Indigenous communities to design educational programs that are relevant and pertinent to their needs and aspirations.

It is imperative that higher education institutions recognize the cultural diversity of Indigenous peoples and implement inclusive policies. University education in Mexico must guarantee equitable

development opportunities regardless of ethnic origin, thereby contributing to greater social inclusion as a reflection of national progress and challenges.

While this qualitative study offers a deep understanding of the challenges faced by Guarijío students at the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM), it has certain limitations that should be considered. First, the number of participants was small (eight students and three faculty members), which prevents generalizing the findings to the entire Guarijío population or to other Indigenous peoples in Mexico. Additionally, the focus was exclusively on a single university, limiting comparative analysis with other higher education institutions that also host Indigenous students. Moreover, as a cross-sectional study, it did not address educational trajectories over time, nor the long-term impacts of implemented intercultural policies. It's also important to acknowledge that interviews were conducted in Spanish, which could have conditioned the full expression of experiences and emotions in students whose na-

tive language is Guarijío. For future research, it is suggested to expand the sample, consider a longitudinal and multi-site perspective, incorporate participatory and collaborative methodologies with Indigenous communities, and explore experiences from a more systematic gender perspective to highlight the specific inequalities faced by Indigenous women in higher education.

The voices of these Guarijío students and faculty invite us to rethink higher education not only as a space for acquiring technical or scientific knowledge, but also as a realm of profound recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity. Education must be understood as an act of social justice that involves breaking down historical, technological, linguistic, and cultural barriers to open truly accessible and meaningful pathways for everyone. In this sense, listening to and making visible the experiences of the protagonists themselves is an essential step towards designing educational policies and practices that include, empower, and strengthen the identity and autonomy of Indigenous peoples.

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincerest gratitude to all the individuals interviewed in the community of Mochicahui, El Fuerte, Sinaloa. With generosity, openness, and deep commitment, they shared their experiences, knowledge, and reflections within the framework of this research. Special thanks go to José Andrés Zazueta Enríquez, Marco A. Soto, María Agustina Yoquivo Suja, Benito Félix Yoquibo, Olga Delia Yoquivo Buitimea, Dora Lizeth Rodríguez, José Flavio Cautivo Buitimea, Bernardo Rodríguez Bacasegua, Liza Zaila Rodríguez, Celia Zazueta Zuja, Raquel Rodríguez Zazueta, and Verdugo Vega Vicente. Their voices were fundamental in understanding the complex challenges faced by Guarijío students in higher education and have enriched this work with the authenticity of their stories. Their collaboration has not only contributed to the academic development of this research but has also paved the way for a deeper reflection on inclusion, social justice, and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in the university setting. Thank you for your trust and for allowing your stories to be part of this collective construction of knowledge.

Authors' contribution

Ana María Neyoy Valenzuela: Investigation, Metodology, Formal Analysis, Proyect Administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Denisse Muñoz Asseff: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Proyect Administration, Writing – review & editing.

References

- Aguilar, A. (1996). *Los guarijíos, víctimas del desarrollo sustentable*. Ponencia presentada en el XXIII Simposio de la Sociedad Sonorense de Historia: Revoluciones en el noroeste de México 1810-1910, Hermosillo, Sonora. <https://chiltepines.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/bibliografc3ada-w.doc> chiltepines.files.wordpress.com

- Avena, A. (2017). Estudiantes indígenas en el contexto de las desigualdades estructurales. CPU-e. *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, (24), 176-198. <https://doi.org/10.25009/cpue.v0i24.2408>
- Ávila Romero, A., & Ávila Romero, L. E. (2014). El asalto a la interculturalidad: Las universidades interculturales de México. *Argumentos. Estudios críticos de la sociedad*, 27(76), 37-56. <https://argumentos.xoc.uam.mx/index.php/argumentos/article/view/145>
- Brayboy, B. M. J., Fann, A. J., Castagno, A. E., & Solyom, J. A. (2015). Postsecondary education for American Indian and Alaska Natives: Higher education for nation building and self-determination. *ASHE Higher Education Report Series*, 37(5).
- Congreso de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos. (2003). *Ley General de los Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas*. Diario Oficial de la Federación, 13 de marzo de 2003. https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/257_300121.pdf
- Cruz, E. (2015). La interculturalidad en las políticas de educación intercultural. *Praxis & Saber*, 6(12), 191-207. <https://doi.org/10.19053/22160159.3769>
- Cruz, A. (2018). *Sonora: la sierra, el desierto y la costa en el contexto de los guarijios*. Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. https://www.academia.edu/38215393/Sonora_la_sierra_el_desierto_y_la_costa_en_el_contexto_de_los_guarjir%C3%ADos
- Dietz, G. (2020). *Interculturalidad crítica y descolonización en la educación superior: reflexiones desde América Latina*. Universidad Veracruzana.
- Dietz, G., & Mateos, L. S. (2020). Educación superior intercultural en México: Avances, desafíos y tensiones. In G. Dietz & L. S. Mateos Cortés (Eds.), *Interculturalidad y educación superior en América Latina* (pp. 45-66). Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas.
- Figuerola, M. (2016). Las lenguas nacionales en la educación superior. CPU-e. *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, (23), 1-5. https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1870-53082016000200001&script=sci_arttext
- González, M. (2010). *Los guarijios: cultura, historia y entorno*. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). <https://www.inah.gob.mx/arqueologia/pueblos-indigenas/guarijios>
- Guerra, E. (2004). La sociointerculturalidad y la educación indígena. En E. A. Sandoval Forero & M. A. Baeza (Eds.), *Cuestión étnica, culturas, construcción de identidades* (pp. 115-138). Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México, Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología y Ediciones El Caracol. <https://doi.org/10.35197/rx.03.02.2007.02.es>
- Haro, J. A., Lara, B. E., Salido, P. L., & Salazar, V. (1996). El sistema local de salud en la región Guarijío/Makurawe de Sonora: retos y perspectivas. *Estudios Sociales. Revista de Investigación del Noroeste*, 7(12). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282331203_DESPOJO_TERRITORIAL_IMPACTOS_COMUNITARIOS_Y_AMBIENTALES_LOS_GUARIJIOS_DE_SONORA_Y_EL_PROYECTO_PRESA_PILARES_2010-20141
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). (2015). *Perfil sociodemográfico de los pueblos indígenas en México*. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2015/doc/boletin8_pueblos_indigenas.pdf
- Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI) (2008). *Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales: Variantes Lingüísticas de México con sus Autodenominaciones y Referencias Geoestadísticas*. México: INALI. https://site.inali.gob.mx/pdf/estadistica/AGRUPACIONES/AGRUPACIONES_GUARIJIO.pdfsite.inali.gob.mx
- Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (INPI). (2020). *Atlas de los Pueblos Indígenas de México*. <https://atlas.inpi.gob.mx/>
- López Gopar, M. E. (2019). *International perspectives on critical pedagogies in ELT*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- López, A. I., & Rojas, D. (2016). Educación superior intercultural en Colombia: ¿Inclusión o asimilación? *Revista Colombiana de Educación*, 71, 245-269. <https://doi.org/10.17227/01203916.71rce245.269>
- Martínez, J. (2015). Desigualdad educativa y pueblos indígenas en México. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 20(62), 113-135. <https://www.comie.org.mx/revista/v2015/rmie/index.php/nrmie/article/view/586>
- Mendoza, R., & Hamel, R. E. (2022). Políticas lingüísticas en la educación superior para pueblos indígenas en México: entre el reconocimiento y la simulación. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 27(94), 15-43.
- Miller, W. R. (1996). *Guarijío: gramática, textos y vocabulario*. México: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. <https://grambank.cild.org/sources/gMillerGuarijio>
- Montoya, L. (2020). De cómo la interculturalidad subsume o reconvierte el debate posindigenista mexicano. *Punto Cunorte*, 1(13). <https://doi.org/10.32870/punto.viii3.104>
- Nakata, M., Nakata, V., Keech, S., & Bolt, R. (2012). Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 120-140.
- Penagos, E. (2004). Investigación diagnóstica sobre las misiones jesuitas en la Sierra Tarahumara. *Cuiculco*, 11(32), 157-204. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/351/35103207.pdf>
- Restoule, J. P., Graveline, F. J., Hopkins, C., & Chacaby, M. (2013). Learning from the land: Indigenous land-based pedagogy and decolonization. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 17, 118-131.
- Reygadas, L. (2021). *Desigualdades persistentes: estructuras de dominación y dinámicas de exclusión en América Latina*. El Colegio de México.
- Rojas, R. (2017). La universidad indígena y comunitaria en Bolivia: desafíos y perspectivas. *Revista Universidades*, 74, 36-47.
- Sáez, R. (2006). La educación intercultural. *Revista de Educación*, (339), 859-881. <https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/revisita-de-educacion/numeros-revista-educacion/numeros-antteriores/2006/re339/re339-36.html>

- Salazar, V., & Salido, P. L. (1996). El sistema local de salud en la región Guarijío/Makurawe de Sonora: retos y perspectivas. *Estudios Sociales. Revista de Investigación del Noroeste*, 7(12). <https://studylib.es/doc/8611718/el-sistema-local-de-salud-en-la-region-guarijio-makurawe>
- Schmelkes, S. (2008). Creación y desarrollo inicial de las universidades interculturales en México: problemas, oportunidades, retos. En D. Mato (Coord.), *Diversidad cultural e interculturalidad en educación superior. Experiencias en América Latina* (pp. 329-339). IESALC-UNESCO.
- Schmelkes, S. (2013). Educación para un México intercultural. *Sinéctica*, (40). <https://sinectica.iteso.mx/index.php/SINECTICA/articulo/view/48Sinéctica>
- Schmelkes, S. (2018). La educación indígena en América Latina: situación actual y desafíos. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, 76(1), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.35362/rie7613157>
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Vélez, J., & Harriss, C. J. (2004). *Guarijíos*. México: Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI). <https://books.google.com/books/about/Guarij%C3%ADos.html?id=MvwVAQAAMAAJ>
- Yetman, D. (2002). *The Guarijíos of the Sierra Madre: Hidden People of Northwestern Mexico*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. <https://www.amazon.com/Guarij%C3%ADos-Sierra-Madre-Northwestern-University/dp/0826322344>