

Youth Identities From An Intercultural Educational Regionalization: Student Trajectories At COBACH-UNICH

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— Abstract —

This text, developed collectively, aims to reflect on the reconfiguration of identities among young people pursuing higher education at the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH) and graduating from the Colegio de Bachilleres de Chiapas (COBACH). Among the elements taken into account for the reflection on identities are the territories, bodies, and spaces inhabited by university students. The theoretical approach of this work is critical interculturality and regional studies.

The student population studied was from the Bachelor's degree programs in Intercultural Communication and Sustainable Development at the San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Oxchuc campuses of UNICH, Region V Altos Tsotsil-Tzeltal. A qualitative methodology with a participatory approach was used, applying body mapping as a tool that contributes to the regionalization of identity through education. The document is structured in two sections. The first: The convergence between identities, territories, and inhabited spaces; the second: Identity reconfigurations from intercultural and regional perspectives. It concludes with conclusions.

Keywords:

Youth identities, interculturality, regionalization, educational trajectories.

Engaging with the topic of identities requires taking into account the multiple interactions that take place on a daily basis among diverse social actors, the forms of communication that are established, the territories in which they live, and the changes that occur in the various contexts surrounding them, which, in turn, affect both individual and collective identities.

Within school contexts, the dynamics that take place among members of the educational community, the contextual changes that students undergo upon entering the university, their interactions with classmates from their own programs and from other fields of study, and their recognition of the new spaces they become part of and the cultures to which they belong, can also have a direct or indirect impact on their identity-related changes.

Addressing the topic of identities through the theoretical frameworks of interculturality and regional studies allows for a more comprehensive account of the reflections generated through interactions with university students at UNICH, who come predominantly from rural or indigenous contexts, peripheral urbanized areas, and public education institutions.

It was found that the main upper-secondary institutions from which students typically graduate before enrolling at UNICH are COBACH and the Colegio de Estudios Científicos y Tecnológicos del Estado de Chiapas (CECyTE); on this occasion, we will focus on students currently enrolled at UNICH who graduated from COBACH, given that it is an Upper Secondary Education (EMS) institution with 338 educational centers distributed across 105 municipalities in the state and, according to the Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación [National Institute for Educational Evaluation] (INEE), served 44.59% of all EMS students in 2019, that is, nearly half of the state's youth student population at this educational level.

In this article, the positioning of the regional dimension is approached through an intercultural educational lens, taking into account, first, with regard to the regional dimension, that:

Within a region, then, subjects converge with their environment, establishing an interrelation that allows the region to be approached from a variety of perspectives, whether sociological, anthropological, historical, geographic, legal, or economic, to name a few. In this way, depending on the perspective from which it is studied, a region can be assigned a particular meaning and classification (López, 2012, p. 22).

In this regard, the starting point is a pre-existing planned or administrative regionalization, such as the state's territorial organization, divided into fifteen Socioeconomic Regions of Chiapas. Here, we focus on Region V – “Altos Tsotsil-Tseltal” – where two other administrative educational regionalizations converge: the COBACH Altos Zone Coordination, which oversees 42 educational centers operating as planteles or CEMSaD (Distance Upper Secondary Education Centers), out of a total of nine COBACH Zone Coordinations; and the UNICH's Multidisciplinary

Academic Units (UAM) in San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Oxchuc, out of a total of four UAM and two Multimodal Academic Units of UNICH.

However, it can be observed how the dynamics of the identities of young students from a palimpsest-type region shape an intercultural educational region grounded in a more phenomenological-hermeneutic approach; that is, based on their own lived experiences, regions emerge, are constructed, and acquire meaning insofar as they are constituted by subjects who, in their everyday lives, delimit the elements they share or do not share.

While the elements of the intercultural educational region proposed here, along with the interactions established among them, are developed from a theoretical-analytical dimension and are shaped by the capacity or creativity of those who formulate it, determining the relevance of certain practices over others, or identifying the substantive elements of the process, stems from the fact that context becomes significant as a starting point and as a point of articulation between the local, national, and global levels (Castillo, 2019, p. 260).

With regard to the intercultural approach, one of the contributions of Maya Lorena Pérez Ruiz is taken into account, drawing on her position that interculturality is a “field of research under construction” (2009, p. 280) and therefore, dynamic; it is also situated within the field of intercultural studies, where, as she notes, the central concern lies in cultural processes and in the social practices that render cultural change visible (2009, p. 282). Accordingly, the analysis adopts an intercultural approach oriented toward critical education, in which students interact with recognition of and respect for their biocultural, linguistic, and gender-based diversity, developing intercultural competencies through their interactions with peers, their academic activities, and the acknowledgment of their non-formal education, as well as through the cultural clashes they experience. In this regard, interculturality:

It goes far beyond respect, tolerance, and the recognition of diversity; rather, it points to and encourages a social and political process and project aimed at building new and different societies, relationships, and living conditions. Here, I am referring not only to economic conditions, but also to those related to the cosmology of life in general, including knowledge and ways of knowing, ancestral memory, and the relationship with Mother Earth and spirituality, among other (Walsh, 2008, p.140).

THE CONVERGENCE OF IDENTITIES, TERRITORIES, AND INHABITED SPACES

Through interaction with student groups from the Bachelor's Degrees in the Intercultural Communication and Sustainable Development at the San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Oxchuc, campuses in Chiapas, it is possible to identify elements

that characterize their diverse identities. In the daily interrelations they have with their classmates, students tend to form small subgroups with shared characteristics, based on factors such as personal interests, places of origin, languages spoken, and cultural, artistic, or sports-related activities, as well as gender; it is also important to note health conditions or other specific issues they may face. These latter elements are likewise part of the identities that students construct through these interactions.

Regarding interaction with others, Tostado notes that:

During the process of identity construction and consolidation, “others” play a determining role: society first addresses individuals or groups, proposing values and models to them; the individual (or group) then recognizes themselves as the recipient of these messages and identifies with the proposed values, ideals, and models, internalizing them and constructing, on that basis, an image or representation of themselves (Tostado, 1999, p. 295).

The interventions were centered on the theme of territorial mapping, highlighting the senses of space-making, practices, and identities within educational spaces, as well as the collective construction of an intercultural cartography of students’ educational trajectories in relation to their care and self-care practices. Two of the interventions were conducted with students from the Intercultural Communication bachelor’s degree program at the main campus in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, with two groups: one of 32 first-semester students and another of 20 fourth-semester students; the third intervention involved 17 fourth-semester students from the Sustainable Development bachelor’s degree program at the UAM in Oxchuc. In total, 69 students participated across the San Cristóbal de Las Casas main campus and Oxchuc, where at least half of this university population comes from educational center in the Altos, Selva, and Selva Norte educational regions of the Colegio de Bachilleres de Chiapas, as an upper-secondary education institution. As such, these are situated experiences that participate in the territorial and identity-related configuration of UNICH’s university youth, but do not represent the region of the Altos as a whole or a complete educational region, as doing so would erase other possible situated experiences from both the different campuses and the vast territory of Chiapas and the South.

With both campuses and degree programs, the activities were proposed in a workshop-talk format, drawing on participatory methodologies and incorporating experiences from teaching, research, personal engagement, and community outreach in both the design and implementation of these methodologies. In this way, the work engaged with territorial mappings, bodily cartographies, and certain autoethnographic elements from a critical interculturality-centered approach, which seeks to address, through an intersectional lens, the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, language, social class, body, health, sexuality, and territory. Beyond this, a key objective was to place at the center the practices, discourses, knowledge, affections,

and self-defined identity expressions of young students. As Walsh notes, “beings being, walking, moving, questioning, transitioning, crossing, thus fracturing the stability and immutability that the modern colonial gender system has imposed on us as the only possibility, the only truth” (2025, p. 18).



Note. Territorial mapping process. Source: Ana Laura Castillo Hernández (2025).

Figure 1. Territorial mapping, San Cristóbal de Las Casas Campus, UNICH, Intercultural Communication. Second semester



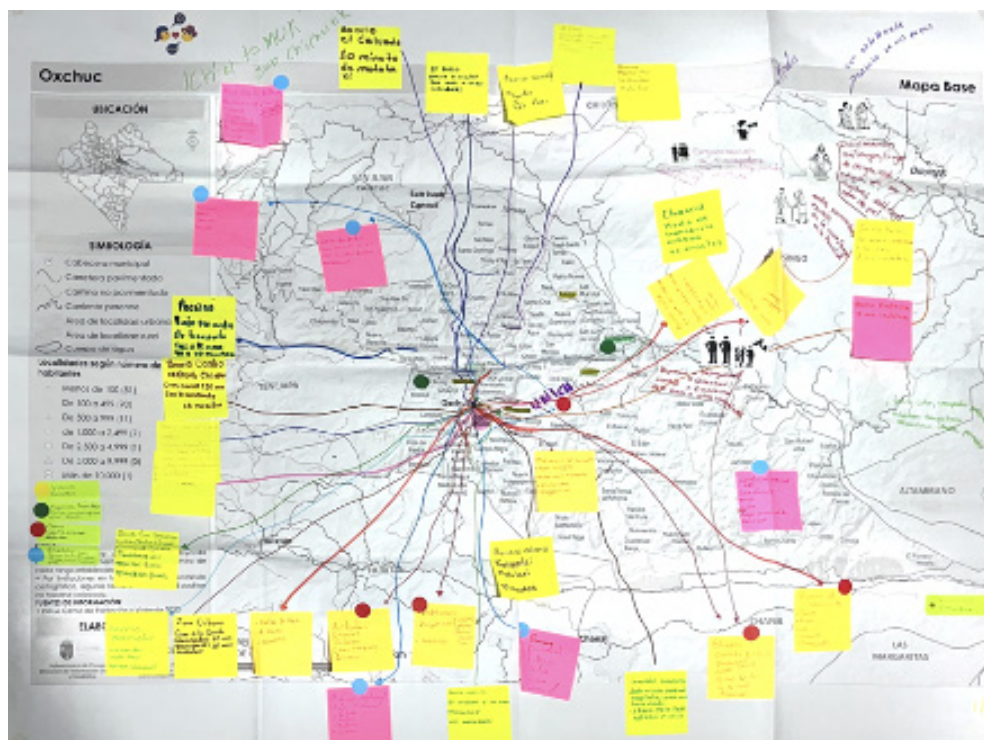
Note. Body mapping. Source: María Gabriela López Suárez (2025).

Figure 2. Territorial mapping, San Cristóbal de Las Casas Campus, UNICH, Intercultural Communication. Fourth semester

Students in the Bachelor's Degree program in Intercultural Communication in San Cristóbal de Las Casas identify, for instance, with having graduated from a COBACH educational center, primarily Plantel 11 San Cristóbal and Plantel 58 San Cristóbal Norte; However, another element present in their identity configuration is intraregional migration within the state, which means they also come from other

educational centers within the Altos Zone Coordination: Plantel 11 San Cristóbal, Plantel 58 San Cristóbal Norte, CEMSaD 120 Nachig' and Plantel 61 Chanal; from the Selva Zone Coordination: CEMSaD 160 Libertad Jolnishtie 2a Sección; and from the Selva Norte Coordination: Plantel 16 Ocosingo, Plantel 86 Tenango, and Plantel 156 El Corralito, the latter located in a community in Oxchuc within Region V Altos Tsotsil-Tseltal, but not administratively belonging to the COBACH Altos Zone Coordination.

This last condition, in which a COBACH plantel located outside the municipal seat, as in the case of Plantel 156 El Corralito, situated 10 kilometers from the municipal center, leads students to choose CECyTE 11 as their first option, given its closer proximity. This, in turn, shapes to some extent their possible higher education trajectories, as they tend to seek degree programs aligned with the graduate profile of this subsystem, which is more technical and agronomic in orientation, or alternatively, Sustainable Development in the case of the UAM Oxchuc programs at UNICH, which is located very close to CECyTE 11.



Note. Final result of the exercise. Source: Ana Laura Castillo Hernandez (2025).

Figure 3. Territorial mapping, UAM Oxchuc, UNICH, Sustainable Development. Fourth Semester



Note. Final result of the exercise. Source: Ana Laura Castillo Hernández (2025).

Figure 4. Final Group Photo, UAM Oxchuc, UNICH, Sustainable Development. Fourth semester

Identities are thus understood as relational, and these relations arise from the precondition of a space that also participates in identity configuration, while at the same time these relational identities constitute and dynamize such spaces.

Blanca Ramírez and Liliana López conceive that:

Space implies a series of coexistence relationships explained from different perspectives, within which bonds, relationships, and interactions take place that lead to the construction, transformation, perception, and representation of geography; all of this is expressed through factors such as location, placement, distance, surfaces or zones, direction, orientation, areas of influence, responsibility, domain, resistance, form, size, position (center-periphery, internal-external, near-far, north, south), distribution, proximity, accessibility, processes of agglomeration and dispersion, patterns, nodes, flows, and routes (2015, p.19).

Through the talks, workshops, and interactive work carried out during the mapping exercises, the groups expressed, as part of the working dynamics, highly significant elements that shed light on how the actors, territories, and spaces they inhabit are determining factors in the various roles they play beyond being students. Hence, as Tostado points out, “identity is constructed and transformed to the extent that it confronts other identities in social interaction” (Tostado, 1999, p. 295).

Part of this work with students leads us to reflect on the categories that emerge in the interactions between groups and subgroups, such as gender, place of origin, mother tongue, age, employment status, social media use, contexts of interaction, and the campus where they pursue their bachelor’s degree program studies.

While the majority of students enrolled in the Intercultural Communication bachelor's degree program in San Cristóbal de Las Casas come from general high schools, and those pursuing a bachelor's degree in Sustainable Development program in Oxchuc come from technical high schools, the way in which they significantly reshape their youthful identity linked to UNICH is through the recognition and revaluation of Indigenous languages and natural spaces; they also acknowledge the structural economic inequality that permeates their academic and life trajectories. In the reflection carried out, mother tongue was identified as a central element, for as Walsh points out, "language is a key sphere of intervention and invention not only at the linguistic level, but also with respect to what is felt-lived-carnal-corporeal" (2025, p. 17).

There is a questioning or concern regarding forms of agricultural production, the use and distribution of natural resources, and the generation of content and information; at the same time, however, students observe a discouraging landscape in the areas of public safety and safety for women, even within educational spaces, where harassment and sexual misconduct have been mentioned.

The exercise allowed us to gain insight into some of the students' perceptions regarding their awareness of spaces and their ability to distinguish between what they consider safe and unsafe environments; in all cases, school commutes represent a risk, for students in Oxchuc, due to the school being located alongside a highway, and in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, due to poor lighting and frequent flooding. In this regard, students also identify the position of inequality in which they live across most of their contexts, and find in university education a possibility for social mobility or for moving beyond their own family environments, which are often marked by precarity, toward other possibilities.

Regarding the theme of self-care, for instance, both campuses share a common orientation toward an athletic body ideal, expressed through participation in sports or gym attendance, as well as bodily transformation through aesthetic practices such as the use of artificial nails, pedicure and manicure treatments, or hair dyeing. Here we find the interrelation between body, gender, and identity; in this regard, Mari Luz Esteban also emphasizes the importance of crossing these with other categories that likewise cut across gender:

such as social class, given the economic accessibility to certain treatments, for example; ethnicity and culture; the activities carried out (work, sports, and so on); and the transformation that occur over time (2013, pp. 120-122).

Students also mentioned family or group embroidery as a safe space in which to set aside or process the negative or violent events in their lives. It is worth noting that these are also traditional forms of knowledge passed down through generations, constituting non-formal educational spaces that likewise shape their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identity formation.

One element that undoubtedly distinguishes the configuration of university youth identities from others is the educational time-space, for the situation of being a “student,” as Pierre Bourdieu says:

it induces a whole range of things that are constitutive of the school situation: they have their bundle of books tied with a string, they are sitting on a motorcycle chatting with a girl, they are only among young people, boys and girls, outside of work, and at home they are exempt from material tasks in the name of the fact that they are studying (1990, p. 122).

For some students, this situation implies distancing themselves from or postponing entry into the workforce, and tends to bring generational conflicts into sharper relief, particularly in rural settings. However, in several cases across the three participating groups, students worked in the afternoons and on weekends in order to cover school or family expenses. For women in particular, receiving a scholarship represents an economic opportunity to support their families, especially when they have children, which is why many enroll two or three years after completing their EMS.

IDENTITY RECONFIGURATIONS FROM INTERCULTURAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The overlaps presented above among the socioeconomic regions of the state of Chiapas, one of the UNICH Multidisciplinary Academic Units (UAM), and the COBACH zone coordinations provide a basis for not overlooking, both in educational policy and in curricula and programs, those migratory elements (international, national, and local), displacements (forced or otherwise), and gentrification processes that reveal dynamic youth populations in constant mobility and, it must be said, in situations of vulnerability, all of which are decisive factors in their identity reconfiguration throughout university educational processes.

Building on what has been presented above, we concur with Giménez’s assertion that “Identities are born, they grow, transform, die, and sometimes are reborn” (Giménez, 1995, p. 21).

During the mapping exercises, reflections emerged regarding the imaginaries associated with each COBACH educational center or UNICH campus, along with certain territorial attributes, which position San Cristóbal de Las Casas as a node to which other cities such as Oxchuc and surrounding communities are subordinated in terms of their sociospatial parameters. For instance, identifying EMS (COBACH) educational centers located in the northern part of San Cristóbal de Las Casas as the most dangerous, due to being perceived as spaces of drug sale and consumption, although the historic city center was also mentioned as a site of drug use, albeit less criminalized.

This is intrinsically linked to the migratory population dynamics and intra-regional displacements toward the norther part of the city, as well as the sense of insecurity perceived by the population. It also reveals the intense zoning of the territory based on economic and sociopolitical differences, but also cultural, linguistic, religious, and environmental ones.

For its part, the educational centralization in terms of services, information, and infrastructure can at times position the UNICH main campus in San Cristóbal de Las Casas as a space of ethnolinguistic erasure, where the two principal Indigenous languages of the area, Tseltal and Tsotsil, are predominantly learned, while lesser interest is generated in the other languages spoken by young students from other regions. To cite one example, at the UAM Valle del Tulijá, out of a total of 25 students enrolled in the bachelor's degree program in Language and Culture program and speakers of Ch'ol, two did not have Ch'ol as their mother tongue but rather Tsotsil and Tseltal — regional migrants as well — yet there was no way for them to have classes in their language, and they even mentioned feeling discriminated against in a degree program that is ostensibly meant to promote the knowledge and appreciation of all languages, which at times was reduced to only acknowledging one's own Indigenous language. This raises once again the question of how to generate intercultural linguistic educational processes so that, from these conflicts, possible strategies for linguistic diversity across different educational regions may emerge.

On the other hand, concerning identity-related elements, students' places of origin and mother tongue play a significant role in their interactions. In the case of the Intercultural Communication bachelor's degree program groups, the student body is composed predominantly of mestizo students, with a smaller number coming from Indigenous communities. It can be observed that place of origin and mother tongue influence the formation of subgroups, not only in terms of companionship and friendship, but also in the working dynamics that take place throughout their academic training. On several occasions, interacting with the rest of the group tends to feel somewhat forced and does not always occur voluntarily. This represents one of the key challenges when working collectively and turning attention toward the recognition of diversity, as well as fostering genuine interest in engaging with and learning from it.

In the case of the Sustainable Development group at UAM Oxchuc, the majority of its members are originally from that municipality or surrounding communities, are speakers of the Tseltal language, and a few do not speak it but understand it, except for one student from the municipality of Ocosingo who is not a Tseltal speaker and communicates in Spanish. Within this group, members make visible that they have felt discrimination, both inside and outside the university, on more than one occasion, due to being Tseltal speakers and because of their ethnic background.

Individual and collective identities are reconfigured. In the case of UNICH students, being part of an institution whose educational approach is grounded in the intercultural model, throughout their academic training and through the

dynamics within the university community (classes, courses, workshops, activities, and extracurricular events), they are encouraged to turn their attention back to their cultures, to revalue their origins and local knowledge, and to identify points of encounter and discord through situations they have experienced involving discrimination, insecurity, and exclusion based on ethnicity or gender, but also through the recognition of their spaces, interests, abilities, and knowledge, elements that can be regarded as a foundation for intercultural encounters.

CONCLUSIONS

This text reveals a space for reflection on educational processes from a regional perspective, drawing on the three interventions described above, which trace the embodied experiences of students. For this reason, the ideas put forward in this section cannot be generalized to other regions where similar dynamics of discrimination or linguistic exclusion may exist. Nevertheless, the work carried out here constitutes an opportunity to engage in a regionalization exercise — that is, to identify elements within a given space-territory in which social practices, discourses, imaginaries, and corporealities converge while others are excluded, insofar as another, somewhat homogeneous space takes shape. This, from an educational standpoint.

This is the first reported case of a GIST in a 9-year-old child, treated with surgery alone, who remains free of tumor activity 5 years after diagnosis.

On the other hand, addressing the topic of identities and youth identities through an intercultural lens with a critical focus is enriching and allows for the positioning of UNICH students from various EMS institutions, particularly COBACH, as youth agents who experience, intervene in, construct, and reconstruct spaces and, consequently, their identities. At the same time, it serves as an important call to make visible and to avoid reducing intercultural education to ethno-linguistic elements or biocultural and folkloric traditions, which are constitutive of living, changing, glocal, and intensely heterogeneous populations, even when they are organized within more or less homogeneous spatialities, as noted above. In other words, the practical implementation of the critical intercultural approach to education — not only in theory but through concrete actions — constitutes one of the tools that makes it possible to avoid the folklorization of education, by revealing the tensions, contradictions, negotiations, and shifting contemporary configurations of student youth within the context of intercultural university education.

Thus, we depart from bodily cartography with the understanding that geopolitical and regional configurations allow us to account for relations of power, aesthetics, consumption patterns, and forms of communication within university spaces and in the territories of students' communities of origin, from microsocial levels — that is, from the level of corporeality itself. These are mestizo and Indigenous student youth whose public education trajectories have moved across precarious and criminalized contexts, autonomous communities, peri-urban spaces, globalized

markets, and gentrified neighborhoods. Their academic backgrounds or family origins in indigenous communities enable them to reflect critically, to question, and to pursue other possibilities for self-identification, particularly in the cultural, communicational, and agricultural production spheres, as well as their ways of life. Stuart Hall (2010) argued in his analysis of identity that, in modern or contemporary societies, there is a rupture between identities as total experiences and identity fragmentation arising from the different sociospatial interrelations that move from the local and regional to the global, as well as from the private and individual spheres to the political and public ones. He illustrates this thesis through the relationship between the nation-state and identity:

On one hand, the nation and all its associated identities appear to have been reabsorbed into larger, overlapping communities that interconnect national identities. But at the same time, there is a movement from below. The peoples, groups, and tribes that were previously inscribed within the entities known as nation-states begin to rediscover identities that had been forgotten (2010, p. 343).

Finally, this text brings to the discussion and seeks to make visible the topic of university youth identities, drawing on participatory tools and the incorporation of qualitative methodological elements from interdisciplinary, intercultural, and regional perspectives, as well as the influence of feminist epistemologies. Together, these allow us to address a subject that represents a gap in the identification of an intercultural educational regionalization, one that it is important to continue exploring and, above all, contributing to through our teaching practice in collaboration with students and colleagues.

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