Rural indigenous students in Peruvian Urban higher education: interweaving ecological systems of coloniality, community, barriers, and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In Peru, Indigenous students from rural communities must often migrate to urban areas to access higher education. Navigating to and through urban higher education is a complex task where Peru's oppressive colonial legacies intertwine with students' community values, resources, and strengths. How can we more deeply understand the interconnecting systems that oppress and support rural Indigenous students, and how can we mobilize these understandings to reimagine higher education? In this paper, we use photo-cued interviewing and ecological systems theory to 1) make sense of rural Indigenous students' experiences as they navigate to and through higher education in urban areas and 2) uncover levers for systemic change to improve higher education policy and practice. In doing so, we expand beyond a two worlds perspective of Indigenous educational experiences to offer a more holistic view on coloniality and Indigenous resilience in higher education.

Higher education (HE) in the West (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), and throughout South America specifically (Quijano, 2015), is deeply rooted in colonial legacy systems that oppress Indigenous communities. Most HE institutions are, foundationally, exclusionary to Indigenous communities – including the stolen land they sit upon, the colonizers they were built to serve, and the dominant knowledges they impart and value (Nandy, 2000). These and other exclusionary practices leave Indigenous students with challenging pathways to and through HE (Benavides, 2015; Cortina, 2013; Levitan & Post, 2017; Yamada et al., 2012). In Peru, despite decades of government intervention programs meant to increase Indigenous students' access, only about one quarter of Indigenous peoples enroll in HE, and only about one seventh of them complete their degrees (Estadística de la Calidad Educativa (ESCALE

[1]), 2019). These numbers are even lower for individuals from rural areas,[1] which are mainly inhabited by Indigenous people and where poverty is the most extreme (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2013).

Rural Indigenous students' low enrollment and graduation rates in Peru result from historical and ongoing European colonization and exploitation, or what Quijano (2000) calls the persisting coloniality of power. Accessing and persisting through HE in colonized contexts like Peru often requires Indigenous students to enact incredible resilience, which helps them to resist the oppressive systems that necessitate resilience in the first place (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Steele, 2018). Indigenous resilience is collective (Penehira et al., 2014), so one of the most significant sources of resilience and strength for Indigenous students is their community (Sumida Huaman, 2020; Waterman, 2012). However, rural Indigenous youth who want to pursue HE must often leave

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[1] ESCALE collects data on Indigenous and Rural inhabitants, but not Rural Indigenous.

their rural home communities and migrate to urban areas, where most HE institutions are located. So, attending HE far from home removes students from those sources of strength and forces them to solitarily enact resilience against and resistance to the cold or even hostile environments they can face in urban centers.

Understanding the complex systems students must navigate to get to and through HE, and the complex impacts of those systems on students, requires frameworks that can illuminate how systems impact individuals. In this paper, we use ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) to explore the manifestations and effects of coloniality and Indigenous ways of knowing and being on rural Indigenous students' access and persistence in HE. Ecological systems theory also helps us to explore students' experiences and contexts to identify leverage points for improving policy and practice so that Indigenous students are better supported in postsecondary institutions.

To illuminate barriers, supports, and areas for improvement in HE, we retell the stories of Quechua and Asháninka young adults from the Andean highlands and Amazonian jungle regions of Peru who migrated to urban Cusco to attend HE. These stories exemplify the complex ecologies that coloniality and Indigenous ways of knowing and being can create and how they impact Indigenous students. Our analysis demonstrates the ethical and pragmatic strengths of using ecological systems theory to explore Indigenous students' experiences in HE – informing policy and practice that supports Indigenous student success in the Peruvian Andes and beyond.

How we come to this work

Our motivation to improve Indigenous youths' educational opportunities comes from our collective 16 years of working in education in the Peruvian Andes. Through our work, which has been primarily in rural Quechua communities in the Andean highlands, we see numerous barriers that impede rural Indigenous peoples from accessing quality education and from persisting beyond primary school. Simultaneously, we see incredible resilience and resistance enacted by Indigenous youth, parents, and elders who leverage their community knowledge, values, and resources to achieve their goals.

We locate ourselves as outsider-insiders (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and as partners. We have many long-standing partnerships with community members and active collaborations in the Cusco region. In community discussions, we share ideas rather than impose them. We are non-Indigenous, non-Peruvian, American, and White, but we share some perspectives and experiences with our collaborators. Kayla grew up in a low-income family in Appalachia and was a first-generation college student. Joe comes from an upwardly mobile middle-class family in Baltimore and has a mixed ethnic background. Like our collaborators, we are both second/third-language Spanish speakers. More details about our positionalities and how we negotiated our privileges in this study can be found in Johnson and Levitan (2021).

Contextualizing rural indigenous students' experiences in peru

Indigenous communities in Peru face deep structural barriers to accessing and persisting in education because the colonial national system is not designed to support Indigenous student success at any level (Sumida Huaman, 2020). Rural Indigenous communities have lacked local schools for generations, and many children walk several hours to attend the nearest primary or

secondary school (Levitan & Post, 2017). Even after more rural school buildings were constructed in the 1990s, issues of non- affirming, Western-dominated curricula (Gálvez & Gavilán, 2016; Levitan & Johnson, 2020; Sumida Huaman, 2013), a lack of access to materials (Levitan & Post, 2017; Woodhead et al., 2009), and poor teacher pedagogy and preparedness (Post, 2018) created challenges that persist today.

Against these and other facets of coloniality, Indigenous community members enact resilience (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Leinaweaver, 2008; Penehira et al., 2014; Quijano, 2000), and Indigenous communities in Peru have, in many cases, successfully fought for their right to a quality education (Cortina, 2013). For example, CRFAs[2]

and the Intercultural Bilingual Education movement have facilitated learning opportunities for Indigenous youth that more adequately center their community knowledges and values (Hornberger, 2000; Kvietok Dueñas, 2019; L. M. Valdiviezo, 2016), which contributes positively to identity development and academic success (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). In HE, Indigenous activism spurred the conception of Beca 18, a federally funded university scholarship and housing program for any Indigenous student who either passes the university entrance exam or who graduates top of their secondary school class.

Coloniality tempers these improvements, however, limiting equitable access to quality education in other ways. For example, while Beca 18 has made HE more accessible for Indigenous students, it lacks sufficient transitional support, can lead to stigmatization, and does not adequately support students' persistence to graduation (Ames, 2019; Guerrero et al., 2019). Additionally, as most postsecondary institutions are in urban areas, supports like Beca 18 that help Indigenous students pay for education and give them a place to live do not address students' isolation from their communities (Guerrero et al., 2019). To climb the racial and social hierarchy and avoid discrimination in the city, Indigenous students often shed markers of their ethnic identity (Leinaweaver, 2008; Pajuelo, 2014). Accessing goods and services often requires Indigenous students from rural communities to take on qualities of the urban elite, such as wearing Western clothes and speaking Spanish (Alcalde, 2020; De la Cadena, 2000). This often coincides with experiencing a loss of connection to their community roots (L. Valdiviezo, 2009) and their identification with their indigeneity (Babb, 2020; García, 2005). Weakening Indigenous students' connections to their Indigenous identities is one of the most insidious colonial projects and has vast implications for their academic success and wellbeing (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Colonial ways of being manifest much more strongly in urban spaces than in rural Indigenous communities, so migration to urban areas for schooling often causes tensions for rural Indigenous students. However, we do not conceptualize these spaces as separate worlds, nor do our collaborators in this study. The contested "two worlds" analogy situates Indigenous students between two worlds – that of Western, colonized society and that of their home communities (Garrett, 1995). Assuming and enacting coloniality/indigeneity and urban/rural as binaries

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[2] Centros Rurales de Formación de Alternancia (Rural Alternative Learning Center), an agricultural boarding school.

mistakenly classifies the ways in which many Indigenous students who migrate from rural communities to urban centers navigate to and through HE. This binary framing can pressure Indigenous students to assume an either/or identity, restraining Indigenous youth as they attempt to navigate the many spaces, places, and situations that they live, study, and work within (Buss & Genetin-Pilawa, 2014; Henze & Vanett, 1993; Trout et al., 2018).

Ecological systems theory

Comprehensively understanding the forces that restrict and support rural Indigenous students requires us to explore the interconnected, not binary, systems in which students live. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) emphasizes the role of environment on an individual's development. It situates the self – individual characteristics such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, or age – at the center of a series of concentric spheres of influence. Moving outward, immediately surrounding the individual, is the microsystem, which includes family, friends, and frequented institutions like school, church, and neighborhood spaces. Next is the mesosystem, or the interconnections between the microsystems, such as between the family and the school. The exosystem includes the interconnections between social settings that do not regularly or directly involve the individual, such as parental employment or local politics, as well as institutions that affect, for example, school funding, social supports, and other material goods or services. The macrosystem is the outer sphere that sustains and is sustained by all other spheres within the system and is constructed of overarching values, attitudes, and beliefs. Each system level relates to and interacts with the others, all influencing the individual at the center.

Here, we explore these various system levels, their components, their relationshipswith one another, and how they influence students' experiences with HE. We situate Indigenous students at the center of a system constructed by coloniality and Indigenous ways of knowing and being – two opposing, yet interrelated concepts. Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power lens foregrounds colonizing systems of power in the construction of the self and the other, illuminating the structures and systems that often render Indigenous peoples invisible. Sumida Huaman (2015, 2020), a Wanka-Quechua- Japanese scholar, helps us understand the values and knowledge systems that guide Indigenous community members, such as an epistemic connection to place, community, and family.

Indigenous community practices and values systems often run directly counter to the objectives of coloniality, which historically and actively seeks to dismantle and replace Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Mignolo, 2017; Weis & Fine, 2012). One solution is *de*colonization, an ongoing, complex process that does not assume that a world without coloniality is possible but that imagines the seemingly impossible within it (Stein et al., 2021). However, Sumida Huaman (2020) argues that research on improving education for Indigenous students should focus less on decolonization, which she argues centers the colonizer, and more on "consciousness-raising" (Freire, 1970), which centers the agency and empowerment of Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing and being. She writes that Indigenous peoples "must understand our current and historical conditions and consider futures that incorporate multiple epistemologies" (p. 254).

Ecological systems thinking allows us to syncretically engage with coloniality (Quijano, 2000) and with culturally-relevant Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Sumida Huaman, 2020) to reveal and de/reconstruct the systems in which HE takes place. It also helps to reveal "levers," or points of

transformation where changing components within a system can lead to system-wide and sustainable improvements (Abson et al., 2017; Olson & Raffanti, 2006). Finally, it can help us imagine Sumida Huaman's call to build and center the agency of Indigenous students and to consider a multi-epistemic future (see also Levitan, 2018). By using ecological systems thinking, we can foster systemic and sustainable change, and we can ensure that our work with students can have a direct and positive impact on their lives and on the lives of those who come after them.

Inquiry strategy

Indigenous and social justice paradigms guide our research approach (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Levitan, 2019). We blend tenets of student voice (Mitra, 2007) and Mink'a methodologies (Sumida Huaman, 2020) to center Indigenous students as expert knowledge holders, to position ourselves and the students as equal collaborators, to acknowledge their agency in our data generation strategies, and to make a positive contribution to the lives of Indigenous community members. Mink'a methodologies are particularly useful for this work as they center the *ayllu*, or the lineages and linkages between individuals and the people and places that constitute their community (Espinoza Soriano, 2011), as epistemology – making community a form and site of Indigenous knowledge (Sumida Huaman, 2020). Finally, we view students' experiences through an asset-oriented lens (Paris & Alim, 2014), highlighting students' resilience against barriers as opposed to framing their oppression as a lack of achievement or ability.

Research setting

Our research setting, much like the lives of Indigenous students, is fraught with perceived binaries. The city of Cusco (population ~430,000), which is also the capital of the district of Cusco, was once the political seat of the Incan Empire and was colonized by the Spanish in the 1500s. The Plaza de Armas – the main square – is flanked by baroque architecture constructed with stones of demolished Incan palaces and temples. At the center of the plaza stands a statue of José Gabriel Túpac Amaru, an Indigenous resistance leader executed in the plaza by the Spanish during the 18th century. Today, the plaza serves as a central hub for Quechua – the region's largest Indigenous group – Catholic, and syncretic (a mixture of Quechua and Catholic) festivals. Atop the mountains beyond the plaza sits the Incan fortress-temple Sacsayhuamán and a large white statue of Jesus Christ. Its Incan and colonial histories and its proximity to Machu Picchu make Cusco one of South America's most popular tourist destinations. Cusco's complex identity matches the complex identities of Indigenous students and contributes to their experiences in HE.

As home to most of the region's HE institutions, Indigenous students from rural highland or jungle communities throughout the region who want to pursue HE often migrate to Cusco. There are three main types of institutions in Cusco – the public national university, private universities, and *institutos* (trade schools) – with prestige, selectivity, per student expenditures, and graduation rates decreasing from first to last (see Estadística de la Calidad Educativa (ESCALE), 2019). Until recently, students who sought admission into more selective universities (public and private) often spent 1–2 years in costly *academias* (preparatory academies) to prepare for the ultra-competitive entrance examination (Cuenca, 2015).

While the nationally-subsidized public university provides free tuition for accepted students, it is the most selective university in the region and admits very few rural Indigenous students. *Institutos*

are the least expensive and the least selective, and so the most accessible for Indigenous students. This hierarchical system thereby tracks rural Indigenous students into lower cost, lower return institutions that provide them fewer supports, or into trade careers that exclude them from greater economic opportunity. See Cuenca (2014, 2015) for more on institutional characteristics in Peru and their inclusionary/exclusionary outcomes.

Collaborators

Our collaborators[3] in this research are 28 Indigenous (26 Quechua and 2 Asháninka, 20 women and 8 men) students from rural mountain or jungle communities. They are all members of the first generation from their families to attend HE, and many are the first to have attended primary or secondary school as well. They currently attend or recently completed their studies in postsecondary institutions in Cusco (18 in *institutos*, 7 in the public university, and 3 in private universities). We used snowball recruitment, beginning with our professional networks and former students from our previous work in the region.

Data generation

The data we present here come from a larger participatory action research project (Snow et al., 2016) that engaged Indigenous students in photo-elicitation research to 1) illuminate how HE influenced students' identities, and 2) produce actionable recommendations for improving HE practice and policy. Minthorn and Marsh (2016) have called for more photo-elicitation research to better understand the lived perspectives and experiences of Indigenous students. Our data generation strategy, photo-cued interviewing (Johnson, 2020), responds to this call and involved students taking photos that represented their identities over time and how access to HE had impacted their identity development. In discussing their identities and identity shifts, our conversations revealed deep insights into students' experiences with accessing and persisting through HE. Through dialogic reflection upon students' photos in individual interviews, we came to understand the barriers that students faced, as well as their sources of strength and resilience. You can read more about our research process in Johnson and Levitan (2021).

We conducted semi-structured interviews in Spanish, using a protocol developed and piloted with a key student collaborator. Our questions centered the students as expert knowledge holders and focused on lived experiences and their perceived impacts. The interviews lasted between 24 minutes and nearly 2 hours. As Spanish was our collaborators' second/third language, we encouraged them to use their home language when necessary, which we then asked colleagues to help us translate. We analyze and represent their stories narratively (Reissman, 2005), focusing on key actors, settings, and events to understand how various system elements and levels interact to affect rural Indigenous students.

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[3] We invited each student to be a collaborator and sought their input at all stages of the research process (with compensation for time and effort). One student – who became our key collaborator – took on the collaborator role in the traditional sense. Other students offered ideas, which we incorporated into the study, but due to work and study obligations could not devote much time to collaboration.

Narratives of coloniality and resilience

The following three representative stories address themes found among many of the students' experiences. In our Discussion, we use coloniality and Indigenous ways of knowing and being as lenses to understand the struggles and strengths that students encountered and carried with them. We use ecological systems theory to make sense of students' stories, elucidate connections between system elements and levels, and identify possible leverage points for improving policy and practice. To protect students' identities, all names and places are pseudonyms.

Ismael

Ismael (23) studied accounting at *instituto*. For secondary school, he attended a CRFA, an agriculturally-based boarding school in a nearby town, Ankupampa: "There was almost nothing that I didn't like about the CRFA – only when we went home, then I missed school.." He lived at school for two weeks alongside other students (figure 1), and then spent two weeks in his home community of Tazin practicing what he learned. Ismael learned how to sustainably farm crops and raise animals, practical skills that helped sustain his family and community.

In contrast, his learning at *instituto* proved less useful. Reflecting on his first days working for the regional municipality after graduating, Ismael noted that the *instituto* did not prepare him for the very basic parts of doing his job, such as working with accounting and workflow management software: "After my first day working, I went to the internet and learned everything I needed to know about it." (figure 2)

During his first year at *instituto*, Ismael lived with extended family in Ankupampa, which is 45 minutes from Cusco by car: "Every day, I had to leave [Ankupampa] at 5am. There weren't many cars, so I had to walk or run 30–40 minutes to catch a bus. I was very tired and would always fall asleep. The trip was also expensive." Once he moved to Cusco, he felt isolated: "In Tazin, everything is quiet. It is not like here in the city where there is another way of speaking. When I arrived, for one week I was all alone. I didn't speak to anyone." Because of his own challenging transition, Ismael took responsibility for showing his cousins (figure 3) around when they first moved to Cusco for school: "My family is very important. I feel the need to let them know everything I know."

Ismael's positive relationships with his family, high school friends, and CRFA experiences stood in stark contrast to his social life and schooling in Cusco: "I didn't know anything about Cusco. I entered *instituto* and everything changed. At school, we trusted each other. We got along as siblings. But not at *instituto*." At *instituto*, people were self-centered and competitive. Ismael saw his CRFA classmates as trustworthy siblings, and his teachers as trustworthy parents who cared for him. At *instituto*, professors lectured and left: "We rarely had trust with the professors."

Eventually, Ismael made *Cusqueño* friends and began to build a new community (figure 4). He enjoys teaching Quechua to his friends: "At school [CRFA & *instituto*], they never taught us in Quechua, only Spanish. But I have Quechua in my roots. In Tazin, we all speak Quechua." Ismael now spends a lot of time going out in Cusco, which he says has "spoiled" him: "Now, when I go back home, I am bored. I don't like much about going back to Tazin. Being in the house and on the farm, yes. But when I'm there I feel lonely." Still, his high school graduation photo reminds him that he

Figure 1.

Ismael and his CRFA friends.

achieved what his mother, a farmer who did not complete secondary school, wanted him to – to be someone "more": "She always told me, 'You have to be better than me.' I wanted that, too. I always had this desire of being something."

Tanisha

Tanisha (26) studied administrative sciences at the national university. Many people in her jungle community of Quenashi (figure 5), including her parents, are refugees from the mountains who fled from the *Sendero Luminoso*, a communist-inspired terrorist organization, in the 80s and 90s. Tanisha's parents speak Quechua, but her family primarily speaks Asháninka now, which is the Quenashi community's traditional language: "We have adapted – a mixture of mountains and jungle." Her region is infamous for drug trafficking and terrorist activity, a reputation that earns it very little governmental support, including for education: "Education is inequitable. Because there were no teachers, our schools would start in June while others started in March. Teachers were too afraid to go there, or it was too far away." This inequality is multi-generational: "My mother has never been to school and is illiterate. She always told us to be better than her, to not lead the life that they have led, but rather be better than them."

Tanisha remained dedicated to this goal and has always been a very driven and successful student. Her favorite teacher in Quenashi was a young *Cusqueño* man named Fredy: "He taught us many things. He was very engaging and really earned our trust." Fredy was the only teacher Tanisha had who was not from her region, and he taught the students about Cusco and Quechua language. Though she

Figure 2.

Ismael at his computer.

liked school and learning from Fredy, as she got older, she grew bored ("The other teachers were very bad, so school was easy for me.") and started teaching herself: "I have always liked learning by myself and doing my own thing. I always tried to stand out among my classmates and be the very best."

In this, Tanisha found success – because excelling in school was her only pathway to achieving the goals that she and her mother had set for her. However, being a top student also presented challenges. One teacher would beat her with a whip when her classmates were not prepared: "I was the class delegate, so he punished me more." As the leader, Tanisha had to "bring order" to her

classmates: "Sometimes, he made us hit each other." While the other girls sat together, she had to sit in the middle of the unruly boys, which led to intense bullying: "The boys would cut open my backpack [to steal things], rip my uniform. They made my life impossible." Her desire to learn also caused social

Figure 3.

Ismael and his cousins going to see a movie in Cusco.

Figure 4.

Ismael and his friends in Cusco.

challenges in the community. For example, when she spent extra time at school being tutored by a male teacher who supported her ambition to go to university, people started rumors that they were in a relationship, which discouraged Tanisha from pursuing other supplemental learning opportunities.

Tanisha graduated at the top of her high school class (figure 6) and earned herself a scholarship to the national university, but her high school did not adequately prepare her to perform on par with her *Cusqueño* peers. She had to spend a year at an *academia* in Cusco so she could pass the university entrance exam: "I scored an 8 [of 20], but others scored 2 or 3. They returned home because they could not get in." As driven as she was, and even after her year at *academia*, Tanisha still could not enter her
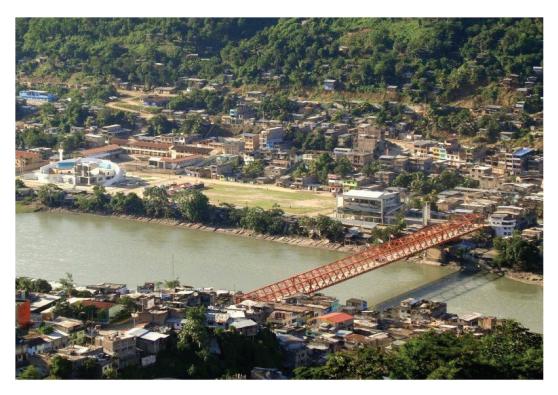
Figure 5. Tanisha's hometown of Quenashi.

Figure 6.

Tanisha as class leader, alongside her classmates.

dream career – obstetrics – because of her math scores: "Even those of us who earned scholarships to attend the university couldn't get in [to the obstetrics major]. At least at that time they had the preparatory academy for us. Now, if you don't get in with the exam, you just don't get in."

Her mother traveled with her to Cusco and stayed for 3 or 4 days before leaving her alone in a rented room: "I was alone. Lonely. I did not want to study. I had never been away from my family. I cried every day." At that time, there was very little public transportation between Quenashi and Cusco. The journey took two days. Even now with the new highway, the trip is too expensive, and she only goes home once a year. Even though Fredy, her former teacher, had taught her about Cusco, her transition was challenging: "When I got here it was a drastic change. I experienced things I had never

Figure 7.

Tanisha and other students with Yachakuq Wasi.

experienced. Things that I had never learned. New things I had to wear." Unlike Beca 18, Tanisha's university scholarship did not cover living expenses: "You had to eat on the street. I think that students forget to take care of their health [because of the other challenges they face]. I got sick with anemia and was hospitalized. Here, we are alone with no relatives to feed us. I don't have relatives who can take me in." Tanisha says that people in the city are selfish and unhelpful,

including her classmates: "If I arrived late to class, no one would help me catch up. I felt like I was being discriminated against. But, if they asked me for help, I would help. I don't like the competition. I like helping people."

Yachakuq Wasi (figure 7), a now defunct university-affiliated organization that supported Indigenous students from the jungle, provided some refuge for Tanisha: "We supported each other. We taught each other." However, even in Yachakuq Wasi, she was bullied by the other students: "There is a prejudice against women from my region of the jungle – they say that we are easy. Those who don't know us say we are terrorists and drug traffickers. They stereotype us." In class, she was mocked for speaking differently than other Indigenous students, most of whom were from the mountains: "They say I'm black. They say my name is weird." Still, Yachakuq Wasi allowed Tanisha to remain connected to her culture and find strength to persist. She showed us photos of her participating in dances and parades in Cusco (figure 8), dressed in Asháninka clothing: "[Yachakuq Wasi] supported us to demonstrate and participate in our culture."

Tanisha recommends facilitating opportunities for students to stay in their home regions for HE: "Going somewhere else is a drastic change. They are going to have to take subjects they have never seen. It's too much to catch up with." Meanwhile, she believes that people who grow up in Cusco take their advantages for granted: "It is not fair. There are so many who want to go to university but can't and these urban students take up spots without valuing it." Nonetheless, in the end, Tanisha feels as though her own struggle was worth it:

> I am the pride of my mother for finishing university. I have cousins who have only gone to *instituto* because it is quicker and leads to faster work. [. . .] I want to return to Quenashi and become mayor. I want to make all the students there have perspective of what they want to do, because if they have a possibility of getting ahead, they should do it

Figure 8. Tanisha and other Ashaninka students after performing a traditional dance in Cusco.

Figure 9.

Carmen's siblings in their bedroom in Wagra.

Carmen

Carmen (19) studies tourism at a private university. She comes from Wagra (figure 9), a highland community that proudly maintains its Indigenous traditions: "I learned in Quechua for all of my primary school. We still maintain the Inca culture, like practicing *ayni, mink'a*, and *mit'a*.," which are distinct yet related forms of community reciprocity in Andean philosophy.

While Carmen remembers some good teachers from her childhood, most were bad: "One drank during school. No one from the regional school board supervised anything. Nobody cared." Carmen believes this makes people from her community very pessimistic about their opportunities: "I always thought that if I failed at something, I could not achieve anything."

Figure 10.

Carmen's role model, Malala Yousafzai.

When Carmen was younger, Wagra did not have a secondary school. (It does now and has become a regional example of culturally sustaining autonomous development.) Students who wanted to continue beyond primary school had to move to a larger town approximately 2 hours away: "When I left my community for secondary school, I was quite shocked because I arrived in a town where they only spoke Spanish. I struggled a lot during my first few years." Then, she began her postsecondary studies at *instituto* after twice failing the national university entrance exam. After just a month in the *instituto*, she was offered financial, academic, and housing support from Q'imi, an international NGO, and transferred to *academia*: "In *academia*, I really learned how to study. I had to study all day – from 7 in the morning until 8 at night – to obtain the grades necessary to enter the private university."

The support Carmen received from Q'imi addressed her most critical needs, like housing: "If you want to study in Cusco, you need a place to stay, above all. 200 soles[4] for a room is a lot for people from rural communities." Through Q'imi, and other NGOs that supported her through secondary school, Carmen has had global opportunities, like traveling to the Peruvian Embassy in the US to speak about girls' education. These global experiences have broadened her perspective, including who she sees as role models (figure 10):

> I started seeing myself a lot like Malala [Yousafzai]—a woman who fights for women's education and is the voice of all women in the world. I would like to support all women who have the interest and desire to move forward. There are many girls, like me, who dream a lot but who do not have the opportunities to leave [their home communities to attend school] because they are afraid of facing society, the city.

Carmen feels empowered by her experiences: "Before, I was disparaging toward myself. I was always really self-conscious. But now, with the knowledge I have, I can stand up for myself and be proud." To illustrate, Carmen shared a photo of herself in traditional Quechua dress ("Why not? It's my culture.") speaking to students in Cusco (figure 11):

> I love speaking in public. One day, I would like to represent my country and influence education to reach all corners of Peru. Education is the main tool in life, as Malala says. Peru is the second to last country in education.[5]

Figure 11.

Carmen in tradition clothing, giving a speech to students in Cusco.

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[4] Roughly USD $60.

[5] Based on OECD PISA rankings

Perhaps because of her success in school, Carmen says that many of her classmates do not believe she is from a community like Wagra: "They say 'You lie.' One day, when my mom came to visit, I introduced her to them just so they could believe it." These kinds of interactions can cause tension and fear for rural Indigenous students: "I have one friend from home who is very capable but is too afraid to speak up for herself. Some students pretend that they cannot speak Quechua. They hide their culture to fit in, and that bothers me a lot."

"I always dreamed of being something in life. I had this impulse: You have to be something. You have to come out ahead in life." For Carmen, a university degree was that ticket: "I always dreamed of working in tourism, but I needed a degree because I wanted to be an international tour guide. I study English in my free hours. I study English and nothing else." Even with international aspirations, Carmen remains closely connected to her community roots: "It is my inspiration. It is my roots. My dad always says, 'Don't forget your roots. If you have a good base, you will face things more easily.'"

Discussion

To more comprehensively understand the ecology of rural Indigenous students' world – and the forces that support and/or work against students' access to and experiences in HE – we need to consider the complex relationship between the personal, interpersonal, political, regional, national, and global systems that students carry to and confront in HE. In what follows, we think through ecological systems theory – focusing on key narratives, actors, and impacts – to find multiple leverage points where policy or practice shifts can support Indigenous students' positive experiences and success in HE.

The things they carry: pre-HE experiences

Students who move to the city from rural communities bring with them significant strength and sources of inspiration, as well as histories of trauma and mistreatment. As a facet of their macrosystem, students cited their deep cultural roots and values, which are enacted by individuals – parents, friends, elders, teachers – and various institutions, like CRFAs and NGOs. These enacted values give strength to students at the center of the system, who in turn can reenact these values outward. For example, Carmen mentions the Andean philosophies of *ayni, mink'a*, and *mit'a* (see Sumida Huaman, 2020 for a more comprehensive discussion of these concepts). These ideals of community reciprocity are part of her roots, which as her father said they would, have helped her overcome challenges. However, some negative cultural aspects, like Peru's *machista* macrosystem – which permeates throughout and beyond Indigenous communities (Alcazar Valdivia, 2019) – led to Tanisha being bullied (especially from boys) for being a top student.

The concept of *ayllu*, or family/kinship units of community (Espinoza Soriano, 2011) – while not directly mentioned – featured largely in students' narratives. Students credited many individuals within their *ayllu* micro- and macrosystem for their opportunities and successes, including parents, friends, inspirational teachers, and other caring figures, like NGO staff. For many Indigenous communities in Peru, the *ayllu* is a place-based source of strength (Fernandez-Osco, 2009), and parental/ elder support in Peru is critical to the success of Indigenous students (Levitan & Johnson, 2020). Having these supports provided motivation to continue learning, to take chances, and the ability (internally and materially) to persist.

The students were also influenced by macrosystem values from outside of their home communities. For example, the individuals in students' primary and secondary schools carried their macrosystems with them, like the Cusqueño culture that Tanisha's teacher Fredy taught about and Carmen's encounters with the NGO staff's connections to the Peruvian Embassy in the US. These complex, cross-cultural interactions add richness to the students' ecological systems that can both support their success and identities and complicate them.

Students' experiences in primary and secondary school played a large role in their access to and success in HE, and these experiences emphasize the complex interconnectedness of various system elements and levels. The ecology of CRFAs illustrate this complexity well. Ismael's CRFA in Ankupampa was a responsive microsystem with "brotherly" classmates and teachers and culturally- relevant pedagogy and curricula that responded to his community's need for high quality education grounded in their subsistence farming lifestyle. The CRFA, like many schools, was made possible by an exosystem of philanthropic individuals and organizations (many international). Now supported by the Ministry of Education, CRFAs started as a nonprofit initiative based on meetings between educators, parents, and elders in rural communities, meaning that they were influenced by a macrosystem of Quechua values, practices, and realities. These realities were partially shaped by the long-standing and continuing conflict of colonial values and politics (Quijano, 2000), in which Indigenous communities were denied access to education, or were forced to receive an education that ran counter to their values, cultural norms, and beliefs (Hornberger, 2000; L. M. Valdiviezo, 2016).

Peru's national colonial macrosystem has left an indelible mark on rural Indigenous communities (as well as the global colonial project). From abusive teachers and absent school boards to a lack of financial investment in rural schools, generations of Indigenous youth have lacked access to quality educational opportunities (Levitan & Post, 2017). Because Tanisha's mother fled terrorism in her hometown (terrorists whose Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist ideologies were cultivated through globalization), her family had to go into hiding, causing Tanisha's mother to be illiterate with no formal education experience, and leaving Tanisha to navigate her education journey on her own.

As postsecondary opportunities neared, the journey often grew more challenging. As first-generation students (Carmen was one of the first women from Wagra to ever enroll in HE), they faced significant barriers to "college knowledge" (see York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Additionally, the poor pedagogical practices in rural schools leave many Indigenous students unprepared for HE, as both Tanisha and Carmen described. So, rural Indigenous students carry with them significant education debts – generated by coloniality – that put them at a competitive academic disadvantage to their non-Indigenous and non-rural peers (Estadística de la Calidad Educativa (ESCALE), 2019).

Finally, students' personal drives – to "come out ahead," "become something," and "move forward" – strengthened their persistence in the face of challenges. As Leinaweaver (2008) notes, to improve oneself in the Peruvian context means to overcome poverty through dedication to improvement and is a moral act relational to one's community. For rural students, this dedication sometimes manifests as urban migration for HE (Steele, 2018) So, even as personal as these drives appeared in students' narratives, they must also be situated as a macrosystem element aimed at community improvement that is common within the rural-to-urban movement of Indigenous students. While

Tanisha and Carmen felt empowered by the idea of contributing to their communities' improvement, Ismael framed it as a responsibility that he had to take on because no one else in his family could. Students' drives can also uphold certain dynamics of coloniality, as rural community life is framed as undesirable or less-than.

The things they encounter: HE experiences

Within their HE microsystems, students most frequently encountered individual and situational manifestations of coloniality: their urban classmates' selfishness, bullying and discrimination, insufficient basic needs support, Spanish-only instruction, and their professors' lack of culturally-responsive teaching practices. These challenges, and countless others, created serious barriers that students had to overcome – barriers they perceived did not inhibit the success of their urban peers.

Postsecondary institutions in Peru and the systems that students navigate to and through them can systemically oppress rural Indigenous students (Wells et al., 2018). Because entrance into Peruvian universities is predicated on a student's performance on competitive national exams, and because most Indigenous students do not receive adequate academic preparation in secondary school, most Indigenous students who seek HE enroll in lower cost, lower quality institutions (Estadística de la Calidad Educativa (ESCALE), 2019). As Tanisha says, *institutos* are seen as a more practical choice for poorer rural students who need training to quickly enter a career and make money. However, even though his municipality job was directly aligned with his accounting major, Ismael felt his *instituto* did not equip him with the knowledge he needed (unlike the CRFA, where his learned farming skills helped him support his family). Additionally, the vertical stratification of HE institutions in Peru – which sustains and is sustained by coloniality – reinforces inequalities and places limitations on the professional aspirations and opportunities of Indigenous students (Castro & Yamada, 2012; Guerrero et al., 2019). This is partly why Carmen was committed to enrolling in a university – an *instituto* degree would not lead to her dream career.

As "home" is central to many Indigenous values systems (Sumida Huaman, 2020; Waterman, 2012), and as housing security is critical to student success and wellbeing (Guerrero et al., 2019), it is unsurprising that Ismael, Tanisha, and Carmen all referenced their living accommodations in Cusco as a barrier or source of strength. For Ismael and Tanisha, living alone caused intense loneliness during their transition, likely due to the stark contrast with the close communal living situations in their home communities. When they began living with other Indigenous students (and importantly for Tanisha, students who shared her identities), their microsystem became more culturally-responsive and their loneliness diminished. Carmen, like some other students in our study, received tuition assistance and housing support from international NGOs (funded by a globalized exosystem), which met her most basic needs and allowed her to focus on her education. Gender-based violence in Peru makes safe housing particularly critical for girls like Carmen who move away from their families for HE (Alcalde, 2014; Instituto Nacional de Estadtistica e Informatica [INEI], 2019).

As both Tanisha and Carmen illustrated, co-curricular programs and NGOs focused on supporting rural Indigenous students played a critical role in their success. Yachakuq Wasi allowed Tanisha to remain connected to her Asháninka roots. Q'imi not only helped Carmen further develop a sense of personal strength and determination (which – as she says – she came with), but it exposed her to a

more globalized world. Carmen's role model is Malala, a woman from Pakistan, while other students most often pointed to their parents as role models. Because familial connections are central to Indigenous values systems, Carmen's introduction to a more globalized exosystem – which she sees as empowering – may also have negative implications for her connection to and relationship with her family (a tension we saw with many students).

Not two worlds, but one (expanding) system

Ecologically exploring the systems that generated students' experiences allows for deeper comprehension of systemic barriers and sources of strength for these students. Of note, these students did not seem to perceive that they exchanged one world for another, but instead carried their world with them and added to it. This provides further counter-examples of the contested "two worlds" analogy, which problematically situates Indigenous students as inhabitants of two worlds – that of Western, colonized society and that of their home communities (Garrett, 1995).

Our study supports the claim that Indigenous students rarely see themselves as navigating spaces and situations where diametrically opposed epistemologies, values, and belief systems are at play (Bang, 2009). Instead, they understand their home community and their HE communities as interconnected parts of a greater whole, though students navigate each in different ways. The intertwined ecological approach that we used to analyze students' experiences allowed us to find the sources of and ways students demonstrated resilience; students often were able to carry their identities with them and hold on to them internally, instead of feeling as if they need to give them up. For example, Carmen said that community was her inspiration. Ismael, however, started to buy into the Cusco culture, but believed that it "spoiled" him. Carmen also shared that other students she knew hid their Quechua identities because of discrimination, but our data cannot speak to how those students conceptualized their world(s).

Pulling levers

Leverage points take already existing opportunities and place them where they can be most effective (Abson et al., 2017; Olson & Raffanti, 2006). With an ecological understanding of students' experiences, we can begin to identify leverage points for improving HE to better support Indigenous students, and to improve HE for all. To illustrate, we look to Ismael. In his childhood, Ismael had positive educational experiences based on the cultural values of his community, which he carried with him to Cusco, where his initial experiences were alienating. The new colonial macrosystem elements that he encountered were not absent from his life in his community, but they played a more direct role in his experiences in Cusco – he was confronted with a cold, uncaring city that used strange words, distant ways of teaching, and lacked a sense of community. Nonetheless, he took what he cultivated at home and in secondary education – such as caring for family and teaching others – and applied it to his life in the city to make friends.

In terms of finding policy levers for improving Indigenous students' experiences in HE, Ismael's story shows that facilitating opportunities for students to interact, and for professors to meaningfully engage with their students would support rural students' transition. Additionally, the strength that Ismael found from the CRFA model starkly contrasted with the experiences of other students in more traditional primary and secondary schools, where teachers would mistreat students by beating them (like Tanisha's), by arriving drunk (like Carmen's), or by only teaching in

Spanish. Ismael pulled strength from the CRFA, which he used to adapt to Cusco and overcome challenges, such as navigating a new job that his *instituto* did not prepare him for. Relatedly, Tanisha and Carmen directly point to their macrosystem of Indigenous values as supports to overcome barriers and discrimination. So, it seems that facilitating educational opportunities that are grounded in and that affirm students' cultures cultivates a resilience that can be leveraged when oppression is encountered, and perhaps remove some oppressive structures altogether.

Tanisha's experience with Yachakuq Wasi serves as another poignant example of a policy lever. Tanisha's macrosystem of Asháninka values, beliefs, and norms was her primary source of pride and strength. Yachakuq Wasi reinforced her cultural pride by connecting her to a group of friends who could understand her challenges and experiences, and to academic supports that allowed her to ask questions and get information. The adversity that Tanisha confronted throughout her life, as well as the pockets of hope and support that she was able to tap into and cultivate through Yachakuq Wasi, enabled her to learn the resilience to overcome academic difficulties and the loneliness that all students mentioned when they moved to Cusco.

That Indigenous students need culturally grounded curriculum is not a revelation (see e.g., Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Johnson & Levitan, 2020; Levitan & Johnson, 2020; Mato, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2014). Importantly, these stories exemplify leverage points that often lie with organizations outside of postsecondary institutions (e.g., NGOs). Pulling these levers within institutions – such as creating a university-sponsored student group to ensure students from Indigenous community can continue to engage in their culture – can foster a greater sense of belonging for students and allow for a more supportive transition and experience. Promoting interculturality in HE and other efforts to decolonize the university also benefit non-Indigenous students and can begin to break down the coloniality of power (Mato, 2011; Quijano, 2000). However, pulling this lever requires microsystem changes, such as dedicated meeting spaces and hiring faculty and staff who are either from these communities or are experts in facilitating this kind of engagement. It might also include exosystem changes, such as redirecting federal funding to support inclusive policies and practices (see L. Valdiviezo, 2009). More importantly, pulling this lever necessitates a macro change – a firm rejection of coloniality, and enacting the belief in a heterogenous future free from epistemic violence (Quijano, 2015; Sumida Huaman, 2020)

There are myriad other examples from students' stories. Providing affordable, adequate housing and basic needs support would dramatically increase student wellbeing and academic success. It is not common for Peruvian HE institutions to provide housing for their students or to have affordable and healthy eating options on campus, perhaps because it is assumed that all students have adequate basic needs support. In the classroom, leverage points include updating pedagogical practices to be both more aligned with contemporary learning theories, as well as being more relational to build trust with students. While this is particularly helpful for Indigenous students, all students benefit from positive and trusting relationships with their instructors (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Funding professional development on how to be more relational with students can help professors tap into a relational ability and community-centric values system that Indigenous students already carry with them as a source of strength.

The aim of our study is to improve Indigenous students' access to and persistence through HE. Through our ecological systems analysis of these students' experiences, it becomes clear that

much of what influences Indigenous students' experiences during HE lies beyond the campus walls – as institutions in this context generally only consist of classrooms and professors. Ecological system thinking helps us to look beyond HE to improve HE. By uncovering and connecting the vast array of values, beliefs, structures, and networks that make up students' ecological systems, we can form a more comprehensive understanding of how students experience their world. The leverage points we have identified can help to increase access and persistence and build students' agency to enact their values within HE. These suggestions build from a student- centered foundation that, if sustained, may help work toward systemic and sustainable change, affording Indigenous communities more equitable access to HE, to claim their power, to transform HE from within, and to realize Quijano's (2015) belief that "another world is possible."

Limitations

Indigenous cultures and ways of being are not monolithic, and they require individualized attention and scholarship that considers their geographical and cultural context (Sumida Huaman, 2015). What our collaborators experienced and shared with us does not represent all the ways that Indigenous students' ecological systems are constructed and how they influence student access and success in HE – in Cusco, in Peru, or beyond. While our research speaks to translatable challenges of a colonized world, and the possibilities of an Indigenized one, we specifically highlight the complexities within our collaborators' contexts. All experiences are subjective, and no two systems are exactly alike, so the ideas for improving HE to support Indigenous students in our study may not be relevant for other students or in other contexts. However, that much of our findings about barriers and resistance to barriers can be found in research from other contexts suggests that ecological systems thinking can be a useful, transferrable approach to understanding students' experiences and informing policy and practice. Our study invites many new questions about students' experiences, their barriers and sources of strength, and the specific strategies required to support them as they pursue their goals. We emphatically encourage others to take up these questions, to use a broad, relational, interconnected, and ecological perspective in their research, and to identify and pull leverage points that will systemically and sustainably improve education.

Conclusion

The world in which rural Indigenous students live, work, and study is not static, and they are not passive objects within it. Indigenous students are active agents in their lives who experience the push and pull factors of their world in different ways, to different effects. The macro colonial influence runs throughout the institutions and individuals that students encounter, but so does the strength and resilience cultivated through generations of Indigenous knowledge and values, and the two collide to create a unique and complex ecological system. HE professionals must learn how to engage and leverage these complexities in ways that support Indigenous student success and the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges and values into HE. Policies and practices meant to support rural Indigenous students' access to and success in HE must take into consideration the multiple ways in which various structures and systems within society may oppress and/or support Indigenous students, but with an intentional focus on students' strengths and resilience and the possibilities that arise when Indigenous epistemologies are reflected in those policies and practices. To enact systemic and epistemic change, we must consider the major issues of access,

quality, and marginalization that Indigenous students face in primary and secondary school. We must consider how local, regional, national, and global policy and rhetoric comes to bear on the resources allocated to Indigenous communities and the narratives used to describe them. And we need to ensure that students' many and varied strengths and epistemologies are the foundation from which we work to improve their experiences and our world.

Disclosure statement

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