The Otomí autonomous educational project: supporting children's literacy and agency

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Abstract

The Otomí Autonomous Educational Project (OAEP) presented in this article arises as a collaborative effort between the academia and the Otomí community based in Mexico City to explore the needs, interest and points of view of children, through their own voices, to find new and culturally appropriate ways to support the development of their literacy and socio-emotional skills while accompanying their social resistance movement.

During two full academic years, university students met with 3-to12-yearolds on the street to conduct literacy and play activities such as shared book reading, storytelling, coloring, drawing and writing, following and adapting a family literacy program to the needs and interests of the children. Throughout this experience it became clear that most of their previous school experiences had been negative and produced resistance and distrust in children's learning. However, from the start of the project the children were eager to participate in the activities, began to gain confidence and soon expanded and improved their repertoire of literacy skills. During the pandemic, the project's aim changed as the Otomí community took over a public building. So we accompanied and documented children's understanding and adjustment in this situation. The project is an ongoing process to promote children's agency and make it visible. Children have been able to improve their self-perception as readers and writers regardless of the negative messages and poor instruction that they receive in school.

Keywords: social resistance movement, autonomous educational project, literacy program, indigenous children, children's agency.

Introduction

Emergence of the Otomí Autonomous Educational Project

This paper aims to analyze the political movement of resistance of the Otomí peoples in Mexico City¹ from the point of view of the children. The educational project started in 2018 in the framework of the first indigenous woman's candidacy to the presidency of Mexico. Several indigenous groups organized nationwide events to support Maria de Jesús Patricio-Martínez's, known as Marichuy, candidacy. As part of those events, the Otomí community resident in Mexico City, asked for the support of the civil society to offer alternatives for the education of their children as they were not receiving that right in a dignified manner: they had experienced discrimination within schools and very little commitment from school authorities to understand their needs as residents with no formal housing in Mexico City. On September 19th of 2018, on the first anniversary of Mexico City's 2017 earthquake, they experienced a violent eviction from the building they had occupied since 1985 in an area of high gentrification in Mexico City. On that morning, beaters arrived to remove people from their homes; children and women were also hurt as a consequence of this violent episode. The Otomí community decided to take over the street where their homes were, giving rise to an autonomous educational project with greater strength and commitment on the part of students from different institutions to join the effort of helping the Otomí community to teach basic literacy skills to their children.

As a consequence of the eviction, children stopped going to school because their parents were concentrated on the political struggles for their housing right which involved being in the marches in the city's main plaza (Zócalo) and attending several meetings with government authorities. Several

members of the civil society organized in the Otomí Autonomous Educational Project (OAEP) contributed to the movement by supporting children's' literacy progress offering them out-of-school support, through the adaptation of a family literacy curriculum, Program ELF (Romero Contreras & Navarro Calvillo, 2012), which has proved to be effective for regular and special education early readers (Romero-Contreras, 2009a; Cuesta-Monroy, 2011; Vázquez-García, 2013). In addition, the OAEP promoted the use of play as a vehicle for children to express their experiences and concerns. Through self-organized and prompted symbolic play, children represented various day-to-day experiences such as selling crafts on the streets as their mothers do. The books of the program prompted several forms of interaction. The children used them to act out book-selling activities, as well as to read to each other. Children selected their favorite books and sat in a corner in pairs or small groups to read them over and over again, and sometimes changed the plot or the ending; generally the older children read to the younger ones and the latter told stories from the images or the plot heard.

Epistemological perspective

The educational project began in a similar way as to social movements: from the bottom up, starting from the social context and immediate needs to respond to daily demands and with a strong commitment to building social justice (Rincón-Gallardo, 2019). The main objectives of the project were to support the development of children's literacy skills and to promote reading as a social practice for children to develop the joy of reading and narrating their worlds. The power of reading as social practice to promote change has long been recognized. Freire (1991) recalls his own process as an early reader in which he

found the joy of meaning by adding to his understanding of the world the critical understanding of texts. According to Freire, reading is an act of politics, knowledge and creation; literacy empowers the individual in such a way that through the practice of critical reading (and writing) she/he can envision new realities and take counterhegemonic action. Conducting research on literacy as social practice demands, according to Street (1997:47), understanding how literacy practices "occur naturally in social life, taking account of the context and their different meanings for different cultural groups". Street claims that the teaching of literacy should take into consideration that literacy skills are not universal because literacy practices vary as a function of context, social norms and types of discourse and in every case "its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power" (48). In this research project, children were observed and offered scaffolding to build on their literacy skills by listening to their voices, learning about their needs, validating their beliefs and recognizing their identities, as part of a collective action-research approach (Foley & Valenzuela 2012).

For the purposes of this project, the perspectives of reading as social practices are linked to feminist epistemologies (Davis &Craven 2016; Schrock, 2018) as a way to explore collaborative approaches to action-research. Feminist ethnography is a fundamental part of critical pedagogies (Moreno-Medrano 2021). It can be considered as a framework of analysis, as an epistemology, as a methodology that integrates various research methods, as a practice, an ideology or a theory. In the case of this project, feminist ethnographies are considered as a whole, because this theory allows us to place people and situations in specific places, mostly at the center, in order to analyze power differences and inequalities. Feminist ethnography (FE) is by definition in constant

construction and its fundamental part is the political imperative of making visible the experiences of subaltern groups. In this sense, FE opposes investigative objectivity and, on the contrary, it positions itself in support of struggles and movements in relation to structural inequalities (Davis & Craven, 2016). Feminist epistemologies allow for the construction of research projects situated in specific sociopolitical contexts, collaboratively, emotionally sensitive, intersectional and above all that contribute to the political agendas of social movements. The vindication of the rights of native peoples in Mexico is still a pending task and still far to become a reality. This methodological approach seeks to contribute to the cause of the social movement, not to explain what is happening from the margins. As feminist ethnographers, we get involved in the movement to position ourselves politically, letting ourselves be affected by emotional struggles within the movement and collectively organize ourselves to construct knowledge in order to advance the social agenda and the vindication of rights.

In addition, this research is in line with the movement *commoning*, as referred by Esteva (2014), to achieve an equitable and sustainable society where diversity is celebrated and which demands new forms of alliances among individuals and social groups that challenge traditional hierarchies such as researcher-participant, teacher-student, adults-children, to name a few.

Method

The project began in August 2018 and has been carried out in two settings. From August 2018 to September 2020 in the camp at Roma 18. On October 12th, 2020—during the COVID-19 pandemic— the Otomí community took the building of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (NIIP) so the

project relocated to this site. At Roma 18, facilitators (all Spanish speaking students and volunteers) were able to plan and carry on a more structured agenda with the children, which involved literacy and play activities, mainly. During the NIIP phase, the facilitators (only Spanish speaking volunteers) adapted their agenda to the ongoing activities of the resistance and documented children's processes of subjectivity and agency.

The Roma 18 stage

This stage of the project was conducted in two full academic periods (2018-2020). Fifteen students form the graduate and undergraduate pedagogyrelated programs at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City participated as OAEP facilitators. The group gathered every Wednesday at the street of Roma 18, where the Otomí camp was placed after the eviction. This neighborhood is a white-middle class gentrified community, close to the center of Mexico City. The main activities conducted were free and guided play and literacy activities, as well as casual interviews. The facilitators took notes of all activities and occasionally videotaped them to complete their notes. About 15 children would attend regularly and another 10 would do so occasionally. Children's age ranged between 3 and 12. During a common journey, which regularly started 10 am at and ended at 2 pm, the group of facilitators would conduct a series of activities such as: sharing a healthy breakfast, playing, reading a book collectively, and doing some art activities. Parents, particularly mothers, regularly became involved during our visits accompanying the children's activities while they were busy with the daily tasks at the camp, or listening to the stories and activities while making crafts. Approximately seven mothers were involved regularly,

and occasionally, especially when preparing for a political meeting, more than 20 women would gather in the camp.

The main objectives for this stage were to document children's previous experiences with literacy, their self-perception as readers and writers and their literacy abilities in order to offer them adequate activities and scaffolding and to observe and document their progress. OAEP facilitators prepared a general guideline for each session that they implemented while exploring the interests and needs of each child in order to prepare future personalized sessions. A daily planning log included the following entries.

- Activities for the day:
 - o Breakfast
 - o Literacy activities following Program ELF
 - o Play activities
- Observation of situations (activities, strategies, materials) that motivate and discourage children's reading interest.
- Summary of ethnographic notes:
 - o Descriptions (observation)
 - Reflections (what worked, what did not work, what could have been done differently)

After each visits, facilitators would meet in class with the first author to discuss their notes and to identify children's perceptions, abilities and needs to plan the next visits accordingly. For this article, both the facilitators' and the class discussion notes were revised and systematized to answer the following research questions: (1) What was the participants' self-perception

as readers and writers at the beginning of the project? (2) How did the intervention change their self-perceptions and literacy abilities? *Literacy activities*. In order to provide children effective scaffolding to build on their literacy abilities, OAEP facilitators were trained in Program ELF (Romero-Contreras & Navarro-Calvillo, 2012), which is a Spanish language family literacy curriculum based on a Balanced Sociocultural Approach (Romero-Contreras, 2009a). During the visits to the camp, the facilitators offered a diversity of Spanish-only picture books² (fiction and non-fiction narrative and expository) and invited the children to read with them. They prepared the reading strategy in advance, according to the children's age and reading abilities, and the program guidelines. Facilitators and children sat on the sidewalks, just in front of the camp to read.



Figure 1. Main characteristics of Program ELF (Translated from: Romero-Contreras, 2009b)

The main characteristics of the program are shown on figure 1. It focuses on promoting children's *self-confidence* and *efficacy* to become active and critical readers and writers through *positive early literacy experiences* that take into account children's abilities to build on them. One of the main resources of the program is to conduct *shared literacy practices*, mainly book reading, where the adult reads to the child while providing scaffolding *accepting children's reading and writing attempts* as steps in the right direction and offering *explicit instruction* to cope with real reading and writing problems, such as knowing how to interpret and use punctuation marks, how different types of texts (narrative, expository, poetic, etc.) are organized, identifying the appropriate meaning in a particular context for a given word, and of course learning that letters represent sounds and how these are combined into syllables, words and so on. The program also promotes children's participation through *guided and independent practice* in storytelling, decoding, text production through conversation and child to adult dictation, invented spelling and drawing.

During the site visits, children were presented the books one at a time, following a flexible version of the program guidelines and protocols allowing for adjustments to satisfy children's' interests and needs. Free interaction with the books was also promoted; this would frequently take the form of story retelling or symbolic play (see Play activities). At the same time, other books were selected based on the children's interest and introduced to them using similar strategies as those offered in the program, in some cases, OAEP facilitators co-constructed new stories and books with the children.

Play activities. The main purpose of the play activities was to connect with the interests of the children and then be open to listening to their narratives. There

was a special interest in understanding the ways in which children lived their sociocultural realities such as the eviction, their experiences of discrimination in the neighborhood and the political movement in which their parents were involved. In this way, interest was put in children's agency (Hernández Rodríguez, 2021) to try to question adult-centered ideas about the participation of children in social spaces.

The NIIP stage

In October 12, 2020, during the pandemic, the Otomí movement, decided to take over the NIIP a colonial building were government officers "attend" indigenous peoples' problems and demands. Children also moved to live in the building and the OAEP project continued only with volunteers, as pandemic restrictions banned students from doing any onsite visits. During this phase, the purpose was to understand how children were experiencing the pandemic in terms of their health care, educational experience, their parents' work, the change in housing, and their family dynamics. The children and their families were observed, videotaped and interviewed during daily activities of community life such eating, healing, playing, working and learning. The aim was to learn about their process and how knowledge and resistance were being produced and shared within the community regarding both their own movement and the pandemic, mainly among the children. Videos and infographics were developed as products of this action-research process. This part of the project was less structured as the purpose was to accompany the children and their families and to support the dissemination of the movement in digital social media.

Results: Work in progress: children's growth in literacy and agency Children's perception of self-efficacy as readers and writers

During the initial site visits at Roma 18OAEP facilitators identified that most children had a low self-efficiency perception regarding their literacy abilities. Children usually said: "I am not good for school's tasks", "I haven't learned to read and write", "My teacher hasn't taught me that letter", and so on. There was a general perception that they were not good enough to reach their teachers' expectations. Some OAEP facilitators came across the messages teachers wrote to students on their notebooks and found out that there were no positive messages at all, all messages were complaints about the student or the parents, such as: "missing homework", "parents did not dictate today", "did not bring the material", etc. Through these messages, the teachers evidenced having a deficit perspective. They obviously did not realize that most parents did not know how to read or write. Unfortunately, the children were not receiving any positive reinforcement from their teachers. Then, the intervention was aimed at helping children believe that they could learn to read and write with joy. OAEP facilitators were very aware of the need to promote positive reading and writing experiences and to show the children and their parents that they were making progress even in a short period of time. Parents realized that some teachers did not take responsibility for their children's learning, as children obtained passing grades without having developed basic literacy skills. The team found that many 4th and 5th graders had below minimal literacy skills and did not have any motivation to continue studying. As mentioned by Ivan Illich's work (1971), schools are not a good vehicle to reach universal education; traditional schools follow an institutional approach that serve the political and economic interest of the majority groups. Learning must be constructed from social networks and

community relationships based on common interests and the search for good and dignified lives (Moreno & Corral, 2018).

Transforming children's perceptions and abilities

From the start, children showed interest in looking at the books and listening to the stories. As the implementation of the program advanced, children's interest in following the facilitators' leads and prompts to participate during shared reading and writing increased. Many became interested in telling stories of their own prompted by the topics or the characters in the books. It soon became evident that children wanted to be heard and wanted to become storytellers and writers, so OAEP facilitators gathered some ideas from children's participations.

A 7-year-old girl, with the support of one of the facilitators co-constructed an illustrated story called "My Grandfather's Ranch" which shows what life is like in her family's community of origin. What follows is the text of the story.

My Grandfathers' Ranch

In my grandfather's ranch there is a long street full of dirt, rocks and more dirt, there are sheep that do be be, rabbits that hop, horses that run (and) gallop, roosters that do kikirikí, ducks that get into the water, cows that eat grass and pigs that do oink; after seeing all the animals I look for my cousins Maria Isabel, Lalo and Marichuy to play hide and seek, catch and dolls; we play with mud and make tortillas. The End.

This story, which was created after six weeks in the program, shows that the child has acquired a good grasp of how to describe relevant situations and events. More importantly, it shows what the author (girl) values about her

experience in her family's hometown and delivers a message of harmony and joy.

The following example was registered in February 2019. It is a one-on-one interaction between the OAEP facilitator and Maria a 7-year-old girl³.

Mirna and I (facilitator) headed to a shady place, to enjoy again the first reading we did together: Into the forest by Anthony Browne.

- -Again we are going to read that book- Mirna said.
- -Yes!
- I remember the red coat and the cake– Mirna mentioned.
- —Woow, what a good memory you have! Let's read it one more time (...) on this occasion I asked Mirna to look for words from a list in the text: forest, grandmother, dad, mom and... her own name! (*bosque*, *abuela*, *papá*, *mamá* y... ; *Mirna!*). She managed to identify all the words in the text. Afterwards, I told Mirna I had something for her to color.
- -What is it? She asked.
- -Your name.
- -My name?
- -Yes, your name!
- -Well, I can write a few letters of my name.

So she began to select the letters that she did know how to write (M, i, r, a,). Then I gave her a sheet with an activity: (Instructions) Read the words and connect with a line those that match: house-house; grandmother-grandmother; forest-forest. Then, we moved on to the next activity: memory game. We started the game and between games and laughter she won the game.

This reading and writing experience shows a girl who is making good progress in her literacy abilities, while boosting her self-efficacy by bonding with the facilitator and enjoying every activity. This example was registered in March 2019 with two girls, Raquel 4 years, and Susana 3 years.

Raquel, Susana and I (facilitator) read the stories "My Mom" and "My Dad" by Anthony Browne. (...) The way they reacted to the stories was incredible. They thought that the character in the story was actually my mother and that the boy in the illustration (at the end of the story) was my brother. Later, we read "My Dad" and they too thought it was my Dad. When they asked me if it was my dad, I said:

—He could be, they are alike—I think we all enjoyed reading—we had a great time—I told them, they nodded. So, I asked them:

- -Girls, and how are your parents with you? Loving and brave like my parents? Raquel replied:
- -My dad beats me. And I don't like him hitting me- I just hugged her.

The difference between non-fiction and fiction is part of the literacy knowledge readers built up. This example shows that Raquel and Susana are clearly still in that process and that the facilitator is also learning how to answer unexpected questions, but all did a great job collaboratively solving real literacy problems. All children's attempts to express themselves during read-alouds and writing activities were accepted and appreciated by OAEP facilitators which contributed to the creation of a favorable atmosphere and the development of self-efficacy and more advanced literacy abilities. Children showed enthusiasm through the making of illustrated stories and were proud to share their work with their peers and families.

Life in the NIIP: the growth of subjectivity and agency

As mentioned earlier, the Otomí movement took over the NIIP in October 2020, half a year after the COVID-19 pandemic started in Mexico.

The research team approached this new dynamic in a different way. Structured or pre-planned activities with the children were difficult to implement as the families were adapting to a constantly changing situation, so our role was to document this change and whenever possible to dig into the interests, perceptions and challenges that the families, but particularly the children were facing. A series of informal interviews were collected, videotaped and photographed. By using videos and photographs to understand children's political struggle it was possible to have access to the personal meaning children were giving to their new living conditions. Literacy then, was a social practice that was used to communicate their subjectivities and agency constructions processes. With these materials we produced two video clips, which were published as part of a larger project (Esteva, Moreno, Feltes, Ojeda, Legorreta, et. al 2020)⁴.

These products revealed that children were constructing political subjectivities at a very young age; they were giving meaning to the struggle for housing, making an effort to understand the political stance of their families. They were processing questions about their living conditions, their sense of security and protection and their quality of life. They also reflected on the pandemic and the differences between life in the village and life in the city.

Here are some examples of one of the videos

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjuuBrniGEM&t=30s), where children give their testimonies about how they feel living in the NIIP facilities and their wishes and needs while they are drawing at a large table in the NIIP yard.

[This is a] house, a kind of house where we have to sleep peacefully and when it rains we don't get flooded and at the same time I'm sad because I miss our house, my house, because I have my toys and my clothes there (8 year-old girl).

I want the rights of girls to be fulfilled and to have a home (8 year-old girl)
I am happy because they feed me here; I play here (7 year-old boy)
I get to eat here, I sleep and it is a nice place to play (7 year-old boy)

I am happy since we took the INPI because this is how we defend our rights, the rights of the boys and the girls. I have learned that we must respect what belongs to others; we must respect the home of others, their language, such as Hñähñu, Spanish and others. I have felt good about all this that we are doing; this is how we defend our rights (8 year-old boy)

Another instrument used during this stage was an activity booklet called *Alegríay Aprendizaje* ("Joy and Learning", Moreno, Aviña and Hernández, 2020)in which children were offered different activities to describe their living conditions at the INPI and at their communities of origin, their eating habits, their experiences and feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the healing remedies their families were using, as well as the labor activities their parents were developing during that time. This booklet was designed as part of a larger project that included other indigenous communities in Chihuahua, Oaxaca and Guerrero (all of them in rural settings) to find out the autonomous strategies that indigenous peoples were building to face the pandemic (see http://xn--alternativasindgenasfrentealacovid19-xkd.org/). These materials were extremely useful in promoting dialogue and reflections between the children and the facilitators and in building products that also improved social literacy practices.

Final reflections

Some of the reflections that arise from this experience are directly related to our commitment both as researchers and as activists:

First, as critical researchers, it is imperative to make visible the sociopolitical agency of children. Our work is in line with Hernández Rodríguez (2021) conclusions after observing how children were able to narrate their worlds in practices that were not necessarily designed to be literate practices, because literacy permeates all our actions. Only through the use of collaborative and affective methodologies is it possible to identify children's agency in their daily practices.

Second, we must recognize that collaborative approaches between academia and social movements remain highly problematic, especially when institutions are unwilling to take political stances on behalf of the movements' demands. In the discourse, universities speak of social justice and democracy, but in practice it is difficult to get out of the game of those in power: the State, transnational companies, national research policies, etc. Researchers must be able to play a social role inside and outside the system to exercise their practice in a more congruent way, in order to maintain solidarity with social movements to amplify their voices while building bridges with other social agents.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that this project has limitations, which are intrinsically related to the conditions of vulnerability of the community, such as: limited participation of children and their families as parents are informal vendors on the streets of Mexico City and they take the children to work with them; and a still small number of volunteers, Spanish-speaking and from Otomí

origin, to accompany the process. We have invited Otomí origin youth to become involved in the project as volunteers and as participants, but as we are unable to offer them a stipend for this activity, most of them have declined because they depend on their daily work (selling on the streets) to make a living.

Fourth, from a feminist epistemology, the actual voices and experiences of subaltern populations are at the core of the process of knowledge construction. Literacy as social practice must be developed within the real sociopolitical struggles of social movements, so that the dialogical learning can be developed. This project is intended to develop on feminist epistemologies and "critical public pedagogies" (CPP) that try to overcome the limitations of hegemonic schooling and to position sociopolitical struggles as part of this search (Burdick, Sandlin, & O'Malley, 2013).

Finally, the experience gathered through this project have reaffirmed our belief that literacy projects must revolve around social and political practices in favor of social movements and demands that seek equity. This is situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), which allows us to understand our role as participative inhabitants in the search for a more just world. When children share how they live, how they work, how they learn, how they heal, how they eat, how they play, from there we can approach and elaborate on their experiences in a more organic way to understand their motivations and needs (Esteva, 2012). This kind of project provides researchers the opportunity to conduct social movement research highlighting intersectionality, as well as decolonial, feminist, political and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Through this project we have been able to confirm, in answering research question 1, that the traditional approaches to literacy of urban schooling in Mexico City negatively affect the way indigenous children perceive themselves as potential readers and writers, as it was demonstrated throughout the children's testimonies. Children's right to education is simplistically reduced to mere access to school; however, the methodological approaches and sociocultural awareness to promote literacy as a social practice are still lacking. Nevertheless, we also were able to modify, in answering research question 2, children's' literacy-related perceptions and abilities through the flexible implementation of Program ELF, a research-based early literacy program, combined with play activities in which children's agency was placed at the center.

We argue that a community and sociocultural approach to literacy is needed to strengthen the other series of rights that this indigenous movement seeks: the right to health services, relevant education, housing, decent work, among many others. Social literacy practices must be built through real dialogues of struggles for social rights and social justice and that involve the active participation of parents, youth and children along with academic activism to build common fronts. Children's voices in this project give educators relevant information in different dimensions; they highlight the personal and structural dynamics around schooling and literacy practices in order to mobilize resources to transform educational services into communal efforts to learn in a relevant way, immersed in a sociopolitical project of indigenous resistance.

Future directions

The project's future depends on how the movement evolves. As accompanying academics our role is to offer options for support and to adapt to the movement changing needs. From the previous stages here presented, we still have materials that we can further analyze in order to better understand how to support these children and youth to cope and learn from their experiences and also how to pass this experience to other undergraduate and graduate students to prepare them to serve diverse students in diverse settings.

Since October 2021, the project at the NIIP has been carried out on Saturday mornings and four different age groups participate: eight children 2 to 5 years of age, twelve children 6 to 12 years of age, ten youths and five young mothers. The future directions of the project include different learning opportunities according to each age group, and the design of educational materials that can be used in a self-directed manner during the week. The two-hour meetings on Saturdays are planned to involve work by age group as well as a shared reading activity in community to have an open dialogue and discussion around the social and political topics that are accompanying the Otomí movement.

Notes

¹The Otomí peoples live in different regions and states in Mexico: state of Mexico, Hidalgo Querétaro, Guanajuato, Veracruz, Puebla Tlaxcala and Michoacán. This ethnic group speak Hñähñu also known as Otomí (see https://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/normas/Otomí.html)

² All participating children and many adults (their parents) only speak Spanish. Although they are of Otomí origin, many have lost their language as a consequence of the ineffectiveness of Mexico's linguistic and educational policies for indigenous groups and also because of their resistance to being educated in their mother tongue, since speaking an indigenous language is perceived as a social disadvantage (see Hamel, 2008; De Leon, 2017).

³ Children's names are pseudonyms.

⁴ The products were presented in a webpage that included products of other indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Chihuahua and Guerrero. http://xn--alternativasindgenasfrentealacovid19-xkd.org/ all of which are part of a larger project funded by Redes Horizontales of CONACYT 2020.

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