Reflections on Bilingual Intercultural Education within the Framework of State Reforms

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Introduction

Relations between indigenous peoples and states help understand interculturality as a space in permanent conflict over matters like ethnic identity, rights and difference, cultural assertion, territory and nation. This dispute crystallizes with education at its core because

More than a pedagogic sphere, it is a political, social and cultural institution; it is a space to reconstruct and reproduce values, attitudes and identities; and for the historic and hegemonic power of the State (Walsh 2000:165)

In this presentation I seek to show the currents visions of BIE as a state-driven policy. I will draw on many occasions from the Bolivian situation to exemplify the risks of an education that is innovative in the Law and in discourse yet traditional in its application and actions.

Hence, I start by sketching the characteristics of the Latin American indigenist policy and the general situation of indigenous peoples. I conclude by saying that only an emancipating intercultural bilingual education can rise to the challenge of equality in difference.

I. Political Changes at the End of the Century

Almost three decades ago a rise of the indigenous could be seen in the entire Latin American region and can be attributed to the combination of three processes: the democratization wave in the region and the acknowledgement of human rights; the

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acceptance of the neoliberal creed, and the acceleration of the globalization phenomenon. The transformation of national and populist-national states that ruled throughout the 20th century gave way to new forms of governing nations and rendering them legitimate with the participation of society and of the diverse organization forms within it. States that sought assimilation in attempting to build a national identity, denying or discriminating against their minorities, ceased to be. Instead, the indigenous population was recognized to be a constituent of the nation, and the existence of their collective rights was gradually being accepted. In relatively little time, less than two decades, 11 countries in the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela) acknowledged in their constitutions the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual nature of their societies. The globalization process, on the other hand, in which circulation of information and the opening of borders to the market and to financial fluxes is prioritized over state control, promoted political and administrative decentralization processes.

II. Indigenous Demands

All these changes are unfolding new political sceneries for indigenous peoples and the struggle for their collective rights to be recognized. As opposed to traditional interlocution indigenism, the indigenist movement’s vindication claims place indigenous people as direct interlocutors. Rather than being obsolete and contrary to integration, as considered in the era of nationalist states, the indigenous community is becoming the basis for state intervention (Gross 2002). The state’s new indigenist policy responds to the growing pressure exercised by the indigenous population—new demands and organization ways that have international support. Demands aim at the political statute (peoples, nations or nationalities), social organization (indigenous’ participation, laws, costumes and social institutions), autonomous economic and social development, and linguistic and cultural development. Moreover, this vindication claim for participation and autonomy is compatible with the form of indirect government and low intensity state intervention proposed by decentralization. Upon presenting themselves as organized actors in solidarity and "territorialized", indigenous peoples occupy a special position in multiple issues that have political, ecological, social and economical dimensions. Within the holistic conception of indigenous peoples,
these dimensions are intimately interconnected. Indigenous demands expressed in fora and congresses, as well as in political spaces, insist on the integrated development of their society within the notion of territoriality.

III. Indigenous Population in Latin America

Despite difficulties presented by censuses that collect quantitative data of a social and cultural category as elusive as "indigenous", estimations place them at 50 million people, which mean 10% of the region's population\(^2\). One of the hindrances in determining the indigenous population is the fact that the affiliation criterion relies on self-appointment rather than on the linguistic or racial characteristics that used to be considered some decades ago. Apropos, of 6,000 to 10,000 languages in the world, Latin America is estimated to have 400 to 500 Amerindian languages. Five centuries ago, the "language jungle" that so impressed Spanish chroniclers had another dimension: in the 16\(^{th}\) century only in Brazil 10 million indigenous people spoke a thousand languages (Diaz Couder 1998). As for population size, most Amerindian peoples have from 500 to 50,000 members. Few indigenous peoples exceed the million: Quechua, Aimara, Maya, Nahuatl, Quiche, Mapudungun; and among them Quechua stands out with 10 million members.

Indigenous people are quite heterogeneously distributed in Latin American countries. Some countries have no more than 5% of indigenous population in their territory (Colombia, Venezuela, and Argentina); others reach 20% (Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Chile); whilst Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Guatemala surpass this record, the last two countries have an indigenous majority within their frontiers (Lopez and Kuper 1999). The region's ethnic and linguistic diversity has distinct hues. Thus, there are 60 to 80 languages in Colombia and Mexico, 32 in Bolivia, and 12 in Ecuador. Within this distribution by countries, there are pockets of indigenous presence way over the national percentage, for example: highland departments in southern Peru (90%); Mexico's southern states, like Chiapas and Oaxaca (60%); and Chile's southern regions (60%). Finally, indigenous presence is increasingly stronger in urban areas and

\(^2\) Coincidentally, in its April issue Survival Cultural Magazine reports 500 to 600 million indigenous people in the world, that is, the world can boast a similar percentage of indigenous population.
capital cities like Buenos Aires, Santiago, Mexico City and Lima; even in countries where the indigenous population is a minority (Lopez 2002:11).

IV. Indigenous Peoples made Minority

As opposed to the term "minority" used in the European sociological tradition during the colonization of Africa and Asia, in Latin-America it is appropriate to speak of peoples "made minority", as established by Catalonians and Basques in their own linguistic policy processes (Lopez 2002:11). Made minority refers to the social and political conditions of a given people or group that may be, number wise, a national majority.

As peoples who have been made minority, and perhaps as a resistance mechanism, indigenous peoples become invisible when immigrating to urban areas. The fact that indigenous peoples spread beyond national borders and span throughout more than three countries, as is the case of Andean peoples (Aimara in Peru, Bolivia and Chile; and Quechua in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina), is also one of their characteristics. Lastly, these peoples made minority also share the trait of hiding their language within their family and intimate milieus, or making it become obsolete by not transmitting it to the younger generations. In the Latin American ambit there are indigenous peoples that have not been able to maintain their language even while asserting their indigenous identity. Nevertheless, a sign of strength and resistance is that, among most indigenous peoples, their languages prevail at a greater or lesser degree along with Spanish and give rise to a wide range of types and degrees of bilingualism. It must be emphasized that maintaining the language bears no relation whatsoever with the population's size, but with factors like group identity and cohesion, physical isolation, the continuous occupation of a territory and territoriality awareness.

V. The Making of Minorities, and Difference

When speaking of peoples made minority, we are referring to the undervaluation and discrimination that were imprinted on indigenous individuals and peoples by national hegemonic societies during the colonial and republican eras. As stated by multilateral agencies, the World Bank, CEPAL, governments, etc., indigenous people
are not only different but also poor and illiterate: in Mexico, more than 80% of the population in the indigenous municipalities is poor; in Peru, 79%; and in Bolivia, 75% of monolingual speakers of vernacular languages is considered poor. Education indicators also set social characteristics for indigenous peoples: Guatemala shows a repetition index among indigenous elementary students of 90%; in Bolivia, a child who speaks a vernacular language is two times more likely to repeat than a student who is monolingual in Spanish; indigenous Bolivians have three years less of schooling than non-indigenous Bolivians (Barnach-Calbo 1997). In Mexico, judging by CEPAL, illiteracy in regions with a greater number of indigenous people is twice as high and in many cases thrice as high as that of the rest of the population (Bello and Rangel 2002).

VI. Typifying Indigenous Peoples

Typifying indigenous peoples as poor is not exempt from ideology. As obstacles for economic modernity and market insertion, indigenous peasants and their livelihood represent a sector of society that amidst the globalization wave must overcome its subsistence economy—based on a reciprocity system strongly controlled by their society—drop their focus on agriculture, personification and deification of nature, cyclical concept of time and the remaining features of indigenous culture. In Bolivia, for instance, a graded scale has been established for provinces that have large indigenous populations, and the "poverty" category has been used to clearly justify the developmentalist actions of financing agencies that manage the state's destinies. The state has established first of all the deficiencies and not so the differences of indigenous groups and peoples. It would seem that changes in the state's indigenist policy do not entirely free it from an assimilating tinge.

VII. State Education Reforms

As a result of the aforementioned processes, demands for an education other than what the state had been propitiating until then have risen with fair strength. Indigenous organizations conceive education as relevant in ways that range from an education of their own, or ethnic education circumscribed to indigenous safeguards or settlements with a specific political statute (Colombia), to a nationwide bilingual intercultural education (Bolivia). Therefore, to illustrate, in 1989 the
CSUTCB, the top trade-union organization, presented its education proposal because

We cannot go on watching just like that, as if nothing were happening, how the school, even today, takes our children from the fields, shows them the mirror of the city and makes them ashamed of their own history, language and culture (CSUTCB 1991:4).

In the indigenous movement, the "peoples' liberation" is a task entrusted to bilingual intercultural education, a tool to build a non-exclusive citizenry and a culture of democracy and equality which in praxis allows for equality in exercising an "ethnic" or double citizenry that respects collective rights and cultural differences. At the beginning of the 21st century the right of indigenous populations to be educated in their own language was recognized in 17 countries; and bilingual intercultural education was carried out within the framework of ongoing educational reforms based on a decentralization policy (Lopez 2002). Education reforms could convey a radical transformation in the perception of difference as deficiency, and an assertion of the indigenous, but, overall, a change in the national education system. However, scepticism is more frequently encroaching among those that claimed for an inclusive education that respects heterogeneity: What interests does the state have in considering the historic, social, economic and political meaning of cultural difference and in building interculturality—not only among individuals but also within its own social, political and juridical structures and institutions? Is there not a contradiction between the constant vindication demands of peoples facing discrimination, racism and inequality and the official wording of interculturality which the state is committed to promote throughout the nation? Could it be a passing fad after some decades of political boom?

VIII. Criticisms of the BIE

Initially a victory, the nature of the state's policy for Bilingual Intercultural Education becomes a "serious and permanent problem that has practical effects in organizational proposals because communities resist them, no matter how good they are, just because they are state-borne" (Green 1996:1-2). This warning, as expressed by the Colombian indigenous leadership in the II Latin American BIE Congress in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in November 1996, summarizes the problem: the inherent mistrust of any state action since state's purposes do not coincide with the indigenous peoples' intentions and demands, for, historically, it
never did so in this part of the world. "When thinking of the State, Bourdieu asserts that a lot of suspicion is never enough..." (Zambrano 2000:158).

Warning voices have thus arisen over a new model of post-modern domination, strategically managed via recognizing the diversity of multiple indigenous peoples, which, if one is to judge by the current sociolinguistic processes, does not offer elements to assume that languages and cultures are being strengthened; beyond rendering education an object and folklore. What is amiss? In principle, education reforms advocate an education model based on the demands of indigenous peoples and grass-root organizations (as from the Education World Conference for all in 1990 in Jomtien); and not, as before, on offers elaborated on ministerial desks with the hegemonic policy as background. Under this instruction, cultural and linguistic diversity is beginning to be considered wealth, not a problem; a possible strengthening so that the student, rooted in his/her immediate ecological, social, cultural and linguistic milieus, can be confronted with other realities and manifestations and be enriched with this knowledge.

The question is if this is feasible in a school conceived as a closed institution, a state instrument and a tool for world order, at the service of the hegemonic. Since the BIE maintains the characteristics of the school, the indigenous culture is submitted to a straitjacket that impairs it, and may even disintegrate it. The Kuna leader and ex-president of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, ONIC, Abadio Green (1996) speaks about the BIE’s fatality entrenched in the own characteristics of the same old school:

- teacher formed through years of reclusion in centralized academic institutions with the instruction of sharing knowledge;
- classroom that gathers children for a given number of hours in spaces closeted among four walls;
- structured, systematic and compartmentalized curricula established to achieve learning aimed at a specific end ("purposeful learning behaviour")
- fixed schedules and timetables
- emphasis on developing cognitive abilities
- intermediation of writing and abstraction.
If the instruction for interculturality is taken seriously and if intercultural education endeavours to bridge cultures, then intercultural education also has to be accepted as qualitatively different:

We can only partially agree that Intercultural Bilingual Education has become an instrument for liberation and ethnic assertion, and a facilitator of intercultural relations. Because, although it isolated other openly integrationist proposals, it persisted in cutting and forgetting the ties from the roots, from the wisdom of the old and the cosmic vision of the peoples... We could say in this occasion that if it is not born from the roots, education—and any political and cultural project—is useless (Green 1996:1)

Green denounces the BIE as non-critic in front of the school, the curricula, the pedagogies and the teachers established by the state system, and casts doubts on the advance in terms of building a new broad curricula above the main axis of the school and of reading and writing, because it is a circular discourse: the flexibility of the curricula is only conceived in the context of a school, with segmented space and time. We are faced with a questioning of the school as a panacea to strengthen indigenous peoples. Likewise, delegating the task of linguistic and cultural recovery to the state is questioned.

IX Teachers and Curricula, Two Critical BIE Elements

In the case of Bolivia, the caudal of teachers attending public education is fed, first and foremost, with youngsters aspiring to social mobility by leaving behind their peasant origin and their indigenous extraction. Albeit badly paid and lacking prestige among the dominant society, rural teachers, as a trade-union body in constant demand for labour vindications from the state, share a quota of power. On the other hand, in regards to their individual position, a teacher typically is not part of the community; he/she "settles" in the community for a while, hoping to be transferred to a school in the nearest town, then the province capital and, at last, the capital of the department. Contempt towards peasants, their livelihood and their attachment to the land and the culture is an easily-perceived constant among teachers. Suffice it to illustrate this with comments from a Raqaypampa teacher, in the Mizque Province, Department of Cochabamba in 1996:

I don’t want them to be like their parents. I don’t want them to drop out of fifth grade and get married like their parents... There are parents who don’t see school as a future for their children, they say school makes children lazy because they don’t sow anymore, nor take the animals to graze, nor those things... I want them to be something in life, I don’t want them to stay here like their parents, I want them to have a profession.
Immigration, leaving the fields behind—even if it means breaking off from their families—is a condition to be civilized. The teacher, along with the rest of the education authorities, personifies and represents the guarantor and transmitter of values and of the hegemonic culture. Moreover, he/she has personally walked that uprooting road in order to play the teacher’s role. Throughout the day to day, he/she participates in "building the nation's common conscience" (Davy in Bordieu 1991:49). Hence, he/she carries out a civilizing mission in which the school is the "chapel of modernization" (Howard-Malverde & Canessa 1995:234). The school, even if intercultural and bilingual, becomes another element in the social mobility system. Once modern values reach periphery regions intensely enough, once groups made minority acknowledge the value of an educational system and the language and culture it represents, they will also start to "collaborate in destroying their instruments of expression" (Bordieu 1991:49).

Parents try then to discourage their children from using their mother tongue—many socialize them in an incipient Spanish. The undervaluation of what is their own is directly proportionate to the alphabetizing school's prestige: "What can I teach my children! I am ignorant, I don't know how to read or write" would say a mother of Cayacayani, Esteban Arze Province, Department of Cochabamba, in 1995. A candidate to a postgraduate course at PROEIB Andes in 1998 wrote: "My parents were illiterate...but they knew how to instil in me the value of respect..." As for linguistic diversity, its potential is not acknowledged by the teacher; quite the contrary, indigenous languages in the classroom and in the national territory cause backwardness:

Languages subject one's will, because if I am a Quechuista or an Aimarista and I want to go to college, I will not find a book in Aimara or Quechua anywhere. Therefore, my life is frustrated and I will have to work in the countryside. That's why in Argentina they had to do what they did with the Gauchos. They eliminated them and only then did Argentina start to grow, because they understand each other, after all, by speaking only one language. Here it is like the tower of Babel, we all speak different languages and nobody understands the others and this is why Bolivia is so disconnected, don't you think so? And that is, it seems, what the government wants, to separate Bolivians (Apolo school teacher, Department of. La Paz).

A not very indulgent position towards aborigine peoples is expressed by this testimony which would even lead us to situate its author in past centuries; yet he is a

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professional educator. As such, he measures the functionality of indigenous languages with the yardstick of the hegemonic language: its ability to be written and its classic bearer, the book, reaching the perfect justification for "submission" that the language made minority generates in its own users.

The second unresolved element is that of the curricula. The complementary branches or diversified curricula in Bolivia should be elaborated regionally with the participation of school boards led by the Director of each educational centre, and must be approved by state education bodies. In some cases the regional curricula is starting to be elaborated by education authorities as Basic Learning Needs carried out by the same teachers aforementioned. Besides some minimum contents, it is likely that a curricula thus generated will fall short of diversity, and display nothing of what the peoples consider their own!

Among teachers formed with a novel curriculum of Bilingual Intercultural Education in Bolivia, one can appreciate how they comply with the didactic order of using local cultural objects in Arithmetic classes and, for this, seek open spaces while, at the same time, they refer to their task of convincing parents to send their children to school: "I am making them aware, 'Do you want your children then to be like you and always stay here?' I tell them so they will see sense" (Sectional school teacher in Wanakawa Tuti, Punata Province, Department of Cochabamba, October 2001).

I was recently told that, when asked by a technician of the Ministry's central level about the advance in building complementary branches, this person answered: "We haven't progressed, it's because there is nothing written..." Once again, it is the state who defines what, how, where, when and with whom to teach, unable to develop other non-conformist options or education programmes uninfluenced by state technicians, both at basic and teacher training level.

X. The Assimilating Approach among Education Actors

In the light of expressions and situations as those shown, it could be assumed that assimilation is the prevalent approach among "makers" of state education reforms. Garcia Castano et. al. (1990:50-51) characterize this approach with the pretension of equating educational opportunities for culturally-different students, which is translated as the intention of substituting differences with dominant cultural
forms. This approach is based on substituting the term "deficiency" with "difference", maintaining the conviction that poverty is explained by the fact that different cultural groups lack the same opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills required by the surrounding society. The objective of education will be to achieve compatibility between classroom dynamics and the original cultural dynamics of the groups of individuals "different" from the dominant cultural group that serves as referent at school. As a result, this is about designing educational compensation systems in which the "different" may rather quickly access competence in the dominant culture, the school being the facilitator of the "transit" from one culture to the other (ibid). The irony in Bolivian education is that, in fact, it is not concerned with improving life quality for indigenous peoples, but rather with causing established cultural and social changes to agree with the dominant society. And this does not only apply to Bolivians, if we are to judge by CEPAL (Bello and Rangel 2002:47):

The current approaches highlight the need to overcome ancient approaches that sought to assimilate those who are culturally different. The new approaches seek to bridge cultures in contact that only act in terms of domination and subordination. The strategy is to think that pedagogic efficacy is managed if intercultural lack of communication is overcome. (Our emphasis)

**XI. To Conclude: Rethinking the Approach and the Commitment**

Who will determine what cultural contents will be valid or appropriate in order to include them in a curricula that people will take as their own? How will difference be made between what is culturally acceptable and what development policies establish as norm (poverty reduction, gender equity, universal rights, etc.)? Who guards the cultural aspect in intercultural education from being reduced to artistic and folkloric expressions, or to linguistic manifestations of culture? Who teaches and how? We completely agree with Garcia Castaños et. al. (1999b) when they state that determining deficit cultures in front of non-deficit cultures is a practice of inequality, not of difference. The peculiar way in which peoples adapt to different contexts is precisely what establishes the difference between peoples. Upon this difference interculturality in general and bilingual intercultural education in special must be founded, not on inequality. To avow a minority culture's deficit in front of an alleged majority culture just because it's dominant is the same as not admitting the capacity of any culture to generate new adaptive strategies in new contexts, and thus denying the egalitarian plane where all
cultures and the human groups that created them are (Garcia Castaños et. al. 1999b:205).

From the official perspective, BIE programmes, as part of language and cultural vindication projects, are conceived as a sort of license or concession in favour of aborigine groups, and not as a core and integrated part of their educational projects that completely identify with minorities' problems. Even under the bilingual intercultural education's objective of liberating peoples made minority from discrimination, indigenous peoples' cultural values are actively undermined and denigrated at school. The absurdity of this situation becomes clear when we remember that any act that transmits culture necessarily implies an assertion of that culture's values. Any type of teaching must generate a need for its own product and, therefore, erect the culture it wants to give as a value; it will achieve this through the teaching act itself (Bordieu 1967).

The bilingual intercultural education approach that could strengthen the wealth of difference is Education as Transformation (Garcia Castaño et. al. 1999a:59-60), founded on the theory of conflict and the theory of resistance. According to these approaches, oppressed groups (in our case, indigenous peoples) do not accommodate passively to the situation of control exercised by dominant groups who structure social institutions to maintain or increase said control. Bearing in mind Giroux's distinction (1992:144) between opposition and resistance, oppressed groups rather have the option to resist by participating actively in attempts to change the entire framework on which basic rules and their premises are based. It is in this sense that education can be liberating, emancipating; when it breaks the reproductive cycle of domination (Janks and Ivenic 1992:306).
It is to be expected that the state, through the apparatus of officials specialized in finding solutions to others’ problems, will be reticent to hand over spaces for decision that foster indigenous peoples’ transmitting their culture and ideology. Nonetheless, the road towards a bilingual intercultural education passes through overcoming its narrowness and through its being located in the ambit of communities and indigenous peoples, accepting the different educations in them and accepting the differences. For Janks and Ivanic (1992:318), overcoming this narrowness requires group solidarity: “Because top dogs rarely roll over and die without a fight, contestation is often more successful when a group of people, similarly disempowered, resist together”.

On the other hand, the current recognition of "the indigenous" in spaces unthinkable some years ago in Latin America, like universities, parliaments, ministries and international organisms favours a more anti-establishment position. Janks and Ivenic (1992:318) refer to this moment in critical linguistic awareness:

> When the socio-historical conditions are stacked more in their favour, people may sometimes feel confident and safe enough to challenge the conventions. They may not accept it when someone doesn't attempt to pronounce their name properly.  

However, we cannot conclude without declaring that insofar as the social, political and economical unbalance of ethnic groups in front of dominant social sectors endures, and while the latter design and execute educational programmes, and appropriate for themselves the right to respond to indigenous peoples' learning needs vision and interests, bilingual intercultural education will be, at best, a dialogue of the deaf, and at worst, a new subtle mechanism of domination.

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4 The BIE Regional Seminar of Iquique gave a nece example of non-acceptance of a mispronounced Aymara: Mr. Pablo Bravo, representative of the Origenes Programme, who came from Santiago for this event, war referring to the Aymará in his presentation, placing the stress on the last syllable, as is customarily heard in the Peruvian coast and in Lima. When his presentation war over, a participant rebuked him and asked him to get used to saying Aimara, because in Aimara it is the next to the last syllable which is stressed.
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