Unexpected Consequences of Intercultural Education Policies in Bolivia

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ABSTRACT: Bolivia is currently immersed in the Education Revolution, based on the implementation of a socio-community education system built upon a series of principles, among which intracultural, intercultural and pluri-lingual education is a fundamental pillar. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from 2008 to 2010 in a school that put into practice some of these postulates. This article focuses on the articulation of curriculum content, practice and new education policies. The school claimed to carry out what the new law proposed in the context of intraculturalism, interculturalism and multilingualism. This study focused on the articulation of practice and curriculum in the school, regarding the tenets of the new law, and the consequences in relation to racism and essentialization of culture.

KEYWORDS: antiracist education, Bolivia, decolonization in education, Education Revolution, intercultural education

Introduction

This article presents a brief ethnographic analysis and reflection on the practice of intercultural education and the contradictions emerging from its praxis: intracultural public education policies, inspired by concepts of social justice, can in fact help to increase inequalities at different fronts of the education process, particularly in those that have to do with cultural (re)essentialization (Osuna 2012). This analysis is based on my fieldwork in Bolivia, where I spent two years (2008–2010) at two different schools in La Paz city. In the ethnography, my major focus was to observe and analyse the official discourse in intercultural education and determine whether this discourse had in fact permeated the school education practice and if so in what way (Osuna 2011). Through the analysis of education policies and my own ethnographic fieldwork, I reached the conclusion that intercultural education, when put into practice, can reproduce and legitimate stereotypes and social inequities.

In the following, I elaborate on my main argument, which I introduce through a brief account of how and why intercultural education emerged in Bolivia.

How and Why Did Intercultural Education Emerge?

In reference to Intercultural Education, Mosonyi and Rengifo (1983) write:

No parece lejano el día en que todas o la mayoría de las naciones americanas y ¿por qué no?- del mundo entero orienten sus políticas hacia los grupos étnicos existentes en los diversos países de acuerdo a lineamientos y principios similares, si bien adaptados a los requerimientos específicos de cada realidad. (Mosonyi y Rengifo 1983: 211) [It does not seem far off when all or most of the American nations and – why not – all over the world, orient their policies towards ethnic groups according to similar guidelines and principles, although adapted to specific requirements of each situation.]

Although, in my opinion, it was not the authors’ intention to present the policies related to ethnic diversity in a reductionist way, the fact is that nowadays intercultural education is often understood as a special education for ethnic groups considered ‘different’ or ‘other’ in opposition to the hegemonic groups. In this sense, one could say that intercultural education...
emerges from the presence of ‘new players’ in the education system, that is indigenous groups in the case of Latin America. In Bolivia, intercultural education emerged as part of an indigenous movement fighting against the indigenous exclusion in national societies. In the 1970s, a model of bilingual education appeared in order to support ‘strengthening the threatened ancestral languages’. In the 1980s this bilingual education expanded to include intercultural education through the introduction of indigenous knowledge and skills. Later, the indigenous population’s demands and the pressure from indigenous movements were noted by national government and by international organizations; this scenario facilitated the emergence of indigenous relevance in the areas of cultural and linguistic diversity in the country (López 2001: 2–8). This major step forward towards the recognition of ethnic diversity meant that other countries started to reflect upon the inclusion of diversity in their political constitutions and, consequently, policies started to be framed within the recognition of diversity; a way to address diversity was to implement intercultural and bilingual education (see Moya 1998). Thus, in this sense, intercultural and bilingual education emerged in Latin America as empowerment policy aimed at the ‘redefinition of relations between state and indigenous peoples’ (Medina Melgarejo 2007, quoted in Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2009: 51). Nevertheless, in Bolivia, one of the more important criticisms against intercultural education until 2006 by the Original Peoples’ Educational Councils was its lack of potential regarding social transformation. Until recently, intercultural education was developed only in rural indigenous schools. One of the stakeholders told me: ‘Parece que sólo los indígenas tenemos la obligación de ser interculturales’ (Diario de campo, noviembre de 2008). It seems like only we, indigenous peoples, have the obligation of becoming intercultural (Field diary, November 2008).

In this sense, one of the main objectives of the Education Revolution is to implement intercultural education throughout the education system.

**On ‘Strengthening Culture’**

As mentioned previously, the leaders of the Original Peoples’ Educational Councils, as well as the main planners of the new education policies, believe that the implementation of Law 1565 had no transformative potential. In this sense, the Education Revolution seeks to be a transformative force through intercultural, intercultural, and pluri-lingual education, among other means.

What does the new component of intracultural education mean? According to the new education law, this new component aims at ‘promoting the recovery, strengthening, development and cohesion of the indigenous people’s cultures’ (art. 6.). In the words of one of the stakeholders for the elaboration of the new education policies:

> Si no sabes quién eres, cuál es tu origen, tu conocimiento, sabiduría, tu historia, eres presa fácil de ser aculturado. [If you don’t know who you are, what your background is, what your knowledge is, if you don’t know your history … then you will be easily acculturated.] (Interview, November 2009)

The new education policy aims at incorporating the intracultural, intercultural and pluri-lingual education into all schools in the country (independently from the ethnic and cultural composition of the population). The interviews I obtained through my fieldwork reveal that the intracultural component was specially aimed at the indigenous students, in an attempt to strengthen their membership to a native culture. So in this sense, and in order to strengthen indigenous cultures, Indigenous Peoples’ Educational Councils are elaborating the new regionalized education curricula to reflect sociocultural and linguistic features of each indigenous group’s culture. These regionalized curricula, elaborated independently, need to be compatible with the pluri-national base curriculum. I would like to point out that this interesting and participatory process might generate hegemonic impositions (Dietz 2003); this could lead to the generation of newly reified identities, which involves treating individuals as if they were ‘essentially’ defined (Grillo 1988: 196, quoted in Dietz 2003: 34).

As Sewell argues, it cannot be assumed that cultures have inherent and essential coherence (Sewell 2005: 171–4, quoted in Rockwell 2007: 177). Therefore, following these arguments, if intraculturality aims at reaffirming the origin, history and cultural identity of the ethnic group, is it possible that these processes will lead to (re)essentializing the ideas of culture and identity of the indigenous groups? For some authors, assuming cohesion in the conceptualization of indigenous ancestral identities is a kind of flexible and circumstantial strategy through which indigenous peoples offer a more advantageous response to the logic of modernity (López et al. 2009: 233). However, I
argue that it is a fundamental task to analyse what ‘ancestral identity cohesion’ means and implies. In this regard, I believe that ‘ethnicity as a strategy’ (Escalona 2010) could deepen the static notion of ‘culture’.

Baud et al. (1996: 18–19) lead us to a discussion between ‘collective’ and ‘individual’ ethnicity, which is not only about the definition of specific characteristics that may differentiate (or force differences) – ‘otherness’ – but is also expressed in other dimensions like the distribution of power and in the hierarchy among different groups (Degregori 1993: 115).

This tension, caused by a hierarchy and unequal distribution of power, is reflected in the school curriculum according to indigenous leaders. In their opinion, the curriculum has favoured, until now, so-called ‘universal knowledge’ to the detriment of ‘indigenous knowledge’. In the words of one of the educational stakeholders:

Lo nuestro, el conocimiento de un pueblo indígena tiene que estar igual que el conocimiento universal y están obligados a que el sistema educativo en general tenga que incorporarlo’. [Indigenous peoples’ knowledge must be as important as universal knowledge and the new educational system must incorporate it].
(Interview, November 2009)

This request is not presented as a conflict. The idea is that ‘that which is ours’ (indigenous peoples’ knowledge) and ‘that which is foreign’ (universal knowledge) coexist in the school curriculum. However, this situation is not exempt from conflict because, what do ‘ours’ and ‘foreign’ mean? ¿Qué es lo ajeno? (…) ¿… cuáles son las fronteras, quién las construye, modifica, deconstruye? [What is the outside? (…) Which are the borders? Who builds, changes and deconstructs them?] (Hamel 1999: 154).

Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that there are regions in Bolivia where different indigenous groups coexist; thus, to choose a particular ‘regionalized’ curriculum could result in conflicts of political interest.2

Cultural Diversity and Education Revolution

According to the Bolivian Political Constitution, interculturality is the educational model for dealing with cultural diversity in the country (art. 98). But what does ‘cultural diversity’ mean? UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) stipulates:

All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. (Art. 5)

UNESCO attaches to education a leading role in the positive assessment and maintenance of cultural diversity. Gil-Juarena (2008) and García Castaño and Granados (1999) approach cultural diversity with reference to different authors and paradigms. According to them, the main approaches and models in dealing with cultural diversity are: acculturation approaches, appreciation of other cultures’ approaches, bicultural education and a socio-cultural approach that promotes and furthers the construction and development of social justice, fighting against cultural, social and political inequalities (García Castaño et al. 2007). Vigotsky’s cognitive learning theory (1995) was framed within the parameters of this approach, and is one of the pillars in the new educational process in Bolivia. In discussing the new curricula, one of the stakeholders said to me:

Tres son las bases de nuestro currículo, el sustento teórico de nuestras propuestas, uno es las experiencias educativas de nuestros pueblos indígenas originarios, dos es la experiencia de Warisata y tres son las teorías críticas, ¿no? Las teorías socio-críticas que ha generado el saber a nivel mundial digamos (…) Freire y Vigotsky (…) las ideas de estos dos pensadores están sustentando nuestra propuesta. [There are three bases in our curriculum, the theoretical basis of our proposals, one of them is the educational experiences of our indigenous peoples, the second one is the Warisata experience and the third one is critical theory, the socio-critical theories (…) Freire and Vigotsky (…) their ideas support our proposal.] (Interview, December 2009)

‘Our curricula’ refers to the regionalized curriculum elaborated by the Indigenous Peoples’ Educational Councils; ‘Warisata experience’ refers to the ayllu-school Warisata (1932–1940), a very important chapter in the Bolivian educational process (Pérez [1962] 1992). Until now, it remains in the national ideology as one of the best indigenous education experiences, which emerged and was implemented from below (López 2005: 77). It is presented as the embodiment of indigenous education from an indigenous point of view (Brienen 2005: 139). In sum, Warisata is recognized as a school that has developed a curriculum in agreement
with the life of the indigenous community and with its own ways of social reproduction; consequently, this school has become an icon in the resistance against the instrumentalization of state schools and their attempts to acculturate ‘the Indian’ (Claure 1989).

The new Education Revolution is based on a decolonizing process in order to fight against racism and discrimination (Patzi 2007). In Education, the decolonizing process is understood as a process aimed at decentralized hegemonic Western thinking and acknowledging other ways of generating knowledge (Mignolo 2003; Santos 2010). In this way, decolonizing processes can lead to the edification of more fair and equitable societies (Walsh 2007: 85).

**Intercultural Education Practices and Stereotypes**

In my view, the great paradox is that although the whole of the Education Revolution (and the new educational orientation) is being built on the basis of decolonization in order to fight against racism and discrimination, when put into practice (in schools), this new orientation could be generating static and essentialized identities (indigenous identities) that, through stereotypes and categories, as Grillo says, ‘involves treating individuals as if they were “essentially” defined’ (Grillo 1988: 196, quoted in Dietz 2003: 34)

My fieldwork in Bolivia focused on two different schools; one school was located in a semi-rural community considered as ‘Aymara context’ by school social agents. This school provided education to children from the community identified (and self-identified) as Aymara and to children identified (and self-identified) as Quechua, mestizos and foreigners. For some of the teachers, because of these ethnic differences this centre was considered intercultural. For the team leading the implementation of the new educational principles in the school, intraculturality preceded interculturalism, and empowerment of Aymara students was a priority, with the introduction of the knowledge and expertise of their ‘culture’:

Buscamos que el niño se empodere de la figura de que cuando trabajan la chacra, ellos cuenten cómo trabajan sus papás la chacra, qué cosas conocen ellos de la chacra. [We seek to empower the child, for example when they work in the ranch, they can tell how their parents work, what they know about the ranch.] (Interview, May 2009)

To these admirable attempts to pursue equality in the education system, the school also generated a series of stereotypes and prejudices through the ‘essentializing’ of Aymara culture and Aymara people. Here are some examples.

The monthly fee paid by the families from the community in this school was less than the share paid by the families from the city in order for it not to pose a serious problem for family finances, particularly for the indigenous children. In return, the families that paid less could ‘complement’ the payment by providing food or work. Thus, in the kitchen it was common to see Aymara women of the community working daily (preparing food, cleaning and scrubbing), thus reproducing the socio-economic divide pattern that children were already used to perceiving from the outside. A teacher told me in an interview:

El tema está muy marcado con el tema de las empleadas domésticas, que cuando alguien tiene dos pesos de más le mete en su casa para que le trabaje (...) Los niños vienen al colegio con el concepto de ‘mis empleadas’ y es una lucha (...) la responsabilidad no es de los changos, es de la familia y esos moldes que intentamos romper aquí se volvían a construir constantemente en su casa (...) hasta ahora es una lucha. [The theme is very strong with the issue of domestic workers, that when someone has two pesos more, they get someone to do their housework (...) The children come to school with the concept of ‘my servants’ and it is a struggle (...) it is not the responsibility of the children but of their families and we’re trying to break that mould here (...) until now it is a struggle.] (Interview, December 2009)

On a different occasion, I was on the school bus and heard a conversation between two children of the city; one of them could not believe that a woman was the mother of one of his companions. The reason? That woman was Aymara (with visible external symbols like a dress with a skirt) and worked in the school kitchen. The woman, therefore, ‘should’ be an employee but not her mother. One of the Aymara mothers working in the school told me that her daughter suffered at school because she felt that her mother was treated by other children like their maid (Interview, November 2009).

In 2006, after the nationalization of hydrocarbons, the Bolivian Government created the *Juancito Pinto Bonus* in order to foster the entry, retention and completion of girls and boys in schools, especially in rural and peripheral areas of the cities (Ministerio de Educación y Culturas 2008). These bonuses are paid
annually and only given to families whose children are enrolled in a public school. The school I have mentioned so far was private and therefore the students did not receive the bonus. When Aymara families decided to transfer their children to another public school, some teachers argued that their only motive was to receive the bonus payment. Undoubtedly there might be other reasons that have to do with personal circumstances or dissatisfaction with the education that their children might be receiving. Someone told me that Aymara parents had very little interest in the education of their children and unfortunately this is a stereotype among middle- and upper-class people in La Paz. Was, then, the private school teacher legitimizing this stereotype with the reflection on the importance of money as the main factor in the Aymara parents’ decision of removing their children from the private centre? An Aymara woman explained her decision to me in this way:

Yo me he comprometido para ir a la cocina pero muy estricto es ir para ir a ayudar; me dice ‘no puede faltar’ pero no es a propósito. Estoy solita y no tengo a quién mandar, unas tres o cuatro veces me he faltado. Me levanto a las cuatro de la madrugada para ir al mercado, más tengo que trabajar, mis reuniones, la chacra … no me da el tiempo (…) Entonces allá la voy a devolver [a otra escuela] (…) Estoy viendo que mucho están jugando, parece que a la profesora no le importa lo que aprendan, ella [su hija] sabía bien pero este año se ha olvidado. [I am committed to go to collaborate in the kitchen but it is very strict; they said ‘you cannot miss’ but I do not do it on purpose. I’m alone and I have nobody to send to replace me, about three or four times I’ve missed. I get up at four in the morning to go to market, I have to work, I have my meetings, the farm … I do not have time (…) Then I will return her [at another school] (…) I’m seeing they [the students] are playing too much, I think the teacher does not care what they learn. She [her daughter] had learned a lot but this year she has forgotten everything. (Interview, November 2009)]

On a different occasion, a girl from the Aymara community was crying because a fellow (from a well-off area of the city) had asked her to bring some kind of sophisticated kitchen appliances to drama class. After asking her to bring them, the well-off girls had said laughing at her: ‘Ah no, sí los ayamaras usan todo de madera y cocináis en qhiri’3 [Oh no, if you Aymara people use only wood utensils and cook in qhiri] (field diary, June 2010). This Aymara girl was feeling terrible and could not understand why these girls were discriminating against her in this way.

At this school the empowerment of children in the community (Aymara) was pursued through the idea of what was assumed to be Aymara culture and knowledge as it is represented, for instance, in the ways to build up shrines, clean up irrigation ditches or dig out chuño.4 Undoubtedly, this type of knowledge is extremely useful for all groups of students, Aymara and non-Aymara, because it strengthens different types of competencies, such as artistic, teamwork, creativity, and so on. In addition, this Aymara knowledge and culture agrees with the principles of ‘process of change’ that the current government tries to implement in the area of education policy. However, it is crucial to point out that what the school assumes to be ‘Aymara’ is a rather reductionist version of the complexity and dynamism that Aymara ‘culture’ and ‘knowledge’ involves.

Final Reflections: De-essentializing Culture and Educating against Racism

A major criticism against intercultural education as currently practiced is precisely its lack of transforming power, having neglected attention to structural inequalities and increasingly urgent situations of exclusion (Bartolomé 2002: 20). For Latin America, Walsh (2005) reflects on interculturalism with reference to processes linked to the need to transform the relationships, structures or dominant relations but argues that the intercultural process goes through the reconstruction of social relationships within new ways of power, and the strengthening of sub-alternized groups (Walsh 2005). Thus, I would like to argue that to de-essentialize culture and to promote anti-racist education are crucial factors in the deep analysis of intercultural education. The first factor is especially relevant to fight the hypertrophied images and identity images in which persons connected with a particular group barely recognize themselves. It is fundamental to respect people’s agency in deciding to which group they belong (or not) and what kind of ‘features’ represent their ‘culture’. The second factor – anti-racist education – implies, from my point of view, the importance of generating educational spaces where people can discuss and be aware of racist mechanisms, avoiding any kind of disguised inequalities. Therefore, from a sense of esteem and respect it would be desirable to offer enough tools to children in order to let them know which cards they could play in the social, political and economic environments in which
they are growing up. And also to teach them how to deal with the advantages, disadvantages and stereotypes, given the structural inequalities associated and attributed to differences. Empowering indigenous students by making use of fixed identity images (used as flashes or slogans) does legitimize and reproduce stereotypes, such as like ‘Aymara women are to be housekeepers’ or ‘Aymara people have this or that kind of features’. Through critical reflective analysis on inequality and construction of differences it could be ‘possible to alter the existing sociopolitical order and question the privileges of the dominant groups’ (Gorski 2008: 516).

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Notes

1. Indigenous Peoples’ Educational Councils (Consejos Educativos de los Pueblos Originarios) were created as organs of social participation in education, from the enactment of the 1565 Education Reform Act in 1994, as an attempt to answer the indigenous demand of social participation in Education.

2. At a recent Conference meeting in the Centro de Estudios Avanzados at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Argentina), a Bolivian student explained to me that there are some schools with more than one regionalized curricula; in these cases, the major issue becomes the language: what language to use in the school when there are students from different ethnic groups? I am very thankful to Rosa for her willingness to share her comments and ideas with me.

3. Aymara word denoting a stove, the right place in the kitchen to make a fire and cook (Layme 2004).

4. A kind of potato.

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