



An analysis of intercultural bilingual education in Argentina

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to assess the state of affairs of intercultural bilingual education (IBE) policies in Argentina. IBE encompasses educational proposals designed to address the specific needs of ethnolinguistic minorities.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is divided into three parts and methodologically analyzes different types of materials (national legislation, bibliography and personal research experiences).

Findings – In the first section, the educational policies on cultural and linguistic diversity are contextualized historically. Later, IBE is defined considering five main characteristics (the neoliberal compensatory education policy, educational decentralization/regionalization, the educational category of the system, linguistic goals and teacher profiles). Finally, the conclusions list the challenges, goals that have yet to be achieved and the future perspectives of this educational policy.

Originality/value – This article contributes to the field of studies on diversity in the schooling of ethnically different groups.

Keywords Educational policy, Diversity, Regionalization, Inequality, Education, Argentina, Decentralization, Intercultural, Ethnolinguistic minorities, Intercultural bilingual education, Teacher profiles, Neoliberal

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

The ethnolinguistic diversity of the indigenous groups of Argentina has been historically hidden within an imaginary that attributes the country's population to European migration. However, as the result of certain political changes that have taken place over the past three decades – like the restoration of democracy and the new paradigms of cultural plurality – new educational projects have been developed nationally to include the native populations and address their needs. This led to the launch of intercultural bilingual education (IBE) for ethnic minorities, who face discrimination not only because of their linguistic-cultural diversity but also because they live in situations of extreme inequality and poverty. Thus, IBE is presented as a way to improve the school performance of certain sociocultural sectors for which school represents an irreplaceable chance at social participation, although these same sectors have the highest grade retention and dropout rates.

The aim of this article is to summarize the achievements of IBE in Argentina and analyzing its definition and pending challenges. To address these questions, this paper is organized in three sections. The first section analyzes the historic features of



educational policies for otherness in Argentina. In the next section, the definition of IBE is explored while considering five features that implicitly or explicitly appear in national legislation: the neoliberal compensatory education policy, educational decentralization/regionalization, the educational category of the system, linguistic goals and teacher profiles. Finally, the future perspectives of this educational policy are examined in the conclusions.

2. Ethnolinguistic otherness and schooling

Argentina is currently defined as a multilingual ethnically pluralist country comprising 20 indigenous groups (Pilagás, Mocovíes, Chiriguano, Chanés, Tapietés, Mbyá, Wichí, Mapuche, Toba, Kolla, Nivaclés, Guaraní, Tupí-Guaraní, Diaguita/Diaguíta Calchaquí, Ava-Guaraní, Tehuelche, Chorotes, Rankulche, Huarpe and Ona). In addition to Spanish and the languages of migration, 14 indigenous languages are spoken with varying degrees of vitality. According to the statistical estimates of the country's last census (INDEC, 2010), 2 per cent of the population stated that they were indigenous or of indigenous descent[1] and 5 per cent stated that they had been born abroad (mainly from other countries of Latin America and Europe, followed by Asia and, to a lesser extent, Africa).

To take this plurality into account, educational planning for ethnic minorities has had different features during different points in history. In general terms, there are two trends:

- (1) monolingual school models where linguistic-cultural particulars are ignored and excluded as part of hegemonic standards that target assimilation (homogenizing policies); and
- (2) bilingual school models included in neoliberal compensation programs where socioeducational inequalities are covered up (focalized policies).

Although these policies have, at times, overlapped and coexisted during different points in time, the first is prototypical of the formation of the nation-state (19th and 20th century) and the second corresponds to current-day policy.

Previous articles (Hecht, 2007, 2009, 2010) have examined the vicissitudes and the features of homogenizing and focalized educational program designs, showing how these have affected state policies which aim to include sociocultural diversity at school. Beyond these issues, it is interesting to note the stigma that IBE policies have in Argentina due to the fact that they were born as focalized policies in the context of the neoliberal model so prevalent across Latin America in the 1990s. Neoliberal policies in education strengthen the anti-democratic and discriminatory nature of educational systems by reducing education expenditure (and encouraging privatization) and by strengthening the mechanisms of segmentation in the educational system (decentralization/regionalization) (Gentili, 1998). At the same time, such measures were hidden behind a discourse dominant in the cultural studies field where the ideas of "diversity", "pluralism" and "multiculturalism" guided the social imaginary. It is precisely this discursivity that allowed for neoliberal educational policies to be reformulated with a focus on ethnicity, as shown in the following section.

Nevertheless, IBE must also be understood in the framework of the legislative reforms that took place after democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983. As part of these reforms, indigenous peoples were granted differential rights and the government's

discourse changed. In the new discourse, the state reduced its historically ethnocentric view to make way for ethnic plurality and respect for multiple identities. However, the existing laws served more as a declaration of principles of “what should be” than as an operational basis for logical interventions (Falaschi, 1998). In other words, there is a visible lack of political will to pass laws that acknowledge indigenous rights, increasing the gap between discourse and practice. In addition, it is important to note that neoliberal policies do not lead to a transformation of the relations stemming from a classification of otherness of indigenous groups. Instead, paradoxically, they tend to consolidate inequalities beneath the shield of a discourse that tolerates differences (Petz, 2006).

In the field of education, there is broad national legislation supporting IBE[2]. Although there are subtle peculiarities in the way this policy is defined, the first resolution establishes the notions with the highest level of consensus:

(IBE) is an education that takes into account the diverse cultures and languages of the populations [...] At the same time, it considers the way in which these cultures and languages relate to the national and international societies which they form a part of. [...] This education is intercultural, as it recognizes the right of the aboriginal population to recover, maintain and strengthen their identity, and to recognize and form bonds with other peoples and cultures that coexist at the local, regional, national and international level. [...] This education is bilingual because it develops the communicational competence of the students at the oral and written level in the language or languages used at home and by the community, with the learning of other languages more commonly used at the national and international level. (Resolution 107, Federal Counsel of Culture and Education: 5-6).

Beyond the novel twist that this proposal involves with regards to traditional homogenizing education, it is important to challenge, as Alonso and Diaz (2004) have, the naïve supposition that intercultural education itself implied a modification of the status quo. It is essential to discuss the questions of “why” and “from which perspective” when assessing an education that is given in contexts of diversity/inequality, as IBE is not simply a “*pedagogization*” of the discourse and intercultural practice (Dietz, 2012). Instead, IBE is about the relationship among political-cultural subjects with different roles in authority-based hierarchies. In addition, as shown in other articles (Hecht, 2007 y, 2009 y; Borton *et al.*, 2010), the effects that the homogenizing and focalized models have had on educational designs are multiple, complex and perhaps even involuntary. For this reason, there seems to be a certain false dichotomic dilemma between inclusion/assimilation and exclusion/segregation (Borton *et al.*, 2010). In other words, there is a dilemma between the effort to include diversity which ends in assimilation and a recovery of diversity which, by imbuing it with a folksy character and bringing it to a standstill, creates segregation. Although these are two different paths, both initiatives yield similar results because neither is successful at revamping the hegemonic curriculum (Connell, 1993). In the first case, students are incorporated within a common dominant culture; in the second, the newly prepared curriculum does address local particulars and interests but ends up shutting itself in. Neither of the two initiatives comes close to effectively democratizing education and, although they were planned with the best intentions, both end up worsening the inequality they were planned to combat. As a result, there are enormous gaps between the goals that led to the creation of IBE and the specific forms it has taken at the institutional level.

3. Intercultural bilingual education

Based on Argentine legislation, relevant literature and my own research experience[3], it is possible to distinguish five main features of IBE in Argentina.

3.1 Compensatory education policy during the neoliberal administration

Unlike homogenizing policies, IBE has been presented as an educational policy that aims to overcome the stereotypes that identify sociocultural diversity with needs that are not being met (educational, linguistic, cultural and cognitive). In other words, it stems from the illusion that the slogan “we are all the same” could be updated as “we are all different”.

However, its design falls short of this goal. When Argentina’s Ministry of Education started the National IBE Program in 2004, it was assigned to the administrative sphere of the National Office of Compensatory Programs at the Department of Equity and Quality. This stands against the idea that an intercultural focus should be at the core of the school system and makes it clear that cultural difference continues to be a “problem” or an “unmet need” to be addressed through compensatory education policies.

Thus, it becomes easy to overlook the fact that IBE is a field of rights that indigenous communities and organizations have struggled for and won. This obliges us to be attentive to the depoliticization of the discourse, as there is no longer talk of social inequality but instead of cultural diversity, based on the erroneous belief that inequality cannot be eliminated but that differences can be articulated in a congruous way (Alonso and Díaz, 2004). Thus, it is essential to approach these ethnic policies with care so that indigenous people are not forced to forfeit the concepts of justice and equality when exercising their rights (Bordegaray and Novaro, 2004).

Beyond these critiques of the program, a positive change occurred in 2007, when the IBE area was transferred to the National Office of Curricular Management and Teacher Training at the Ministry of Education. This relocation on the institutional flow chart is promising because it moves past the diversity – difference – disadvantage equivalency though there are no data currently available to confirm that this change has in fact been positive.

3.2 Educational decentralization/regionalization

With a traditionally centralized educational system like that of Argentina, the proposal to decentralize/regionalize education allows local characteristics to be discerned and valued. This is done through actions aimed at localizing curricular contents and strengthening the autonomies of educational institutions. However, this process had contradictory effects, as it took place during a wave of neoliberal reforms; it involved a reduction of public spending at the federal level since educational services were transferred to the provinces. Thus, the segmentation of the educational system was legitimized and the country’s broad socioeconomic inequalities were replicated, given that the indigenous groups live in the poorest provinces. As a result, instead of fostering a fair public educational system, the inequalities between districts with or without financial resources festered and grew.

IBE, as can be seen, cannot be summarized in a simple equation that combines “educational quality” with “ethnic revindication”. Obviously, we distance ourselves from the neoliberal discourses regarding “educational quality” and return instead to the analysis done by Hamel (2009), who confirmed the inequalities that emerge in a

comparison of public schooling by region. We also concur with [Acuña and Lapalma \(2002\)](#) who argued that in spite of the recognition and need for IBE, significant advances have not been made in their design or implementation. Unfavorable socioeconomic conditions combined with the low budgets and lack of interest on the part of government officials have pushed aboriginal communities to become increasingly more isolated and impoverished. Significantly, these factors have also kept the indigenous from exercising the right to an education that values and respects them while ensuring they have similar possibilities for social insertion in the future.

3.3 Educational category of IBE

The national education law (No. 26,206/2006) defines IBE as an educational category[4]:

The educational system category for preschool, elementary and high school education that guarantees the constitutional right of the indigenous people, in accordance with Article 75, Section 17 of the National Constitution, to receive an education that contributes to preserving and strengthening their cultural standards, their language, their world vision and their ethnic identity; to play an active role in a multicultural world and to improve their quality of life. Furthermore, IBE promotes a mutually enriching dialogue of knowledge and values among indigenous people and ethnic populations with ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences and fosters the recognition and respect of said differences. (National Education Law, Section XI, Article 52).

This definition limits IBE to indigenous people and to the first three levels of education. Although the notion of different categories would seem to overcome the ghettoizing and compensatory vision of education – as it is understood as a project that responds to specific requirements with the aim of guaranteeing equality in the right to education – there are still doubts due to its narrow scope. The fact that IBE is reserved “exclusively for the indigenous” means eliminating the inclusionary focus that these proposals should have while excluding migrant and non-indigenous students. This equivalency (intercultural equals indigenous) is highly complex in the context of Argentina for many reasons. On the one hand, this is due to the isomorphism that generally associates indigenous areas with the countryside, making the urban space a location where otherness is made invisible ([Hecht, 2006](#)), on the other hand, it is owed to the fact that beside the indigenous population, there are many migrants who are not visible in this approach and as a result, subtle forms of discrimination can be found within the framework of a policy that claims to be inclusive.

Another noteworthy characteristic that can be seen in this definition of IBE and from documented experiences is the emphasis on the lower levels of schooling (preschool and the first two years of elementary school). According to the last Annual Report (2009) by the Federal Network of Educational Information, there were 424 preschool units in the IBE category, 720 units in elementary schools and 220 high school units. There is clearly less interest in the upper levels, with no programs whatsoever at the tertiary level. The corollary of this discontinuity of IBE in the educational careers of the recipients is the devaluation of their linguistic-cultural patrimony in the long-term.

3.4 Linguistic goals

IBE proposes actions to include indigenous languages in the schooling processes of children who acknowledge that they are indigenous. However, there are no specifications on how to include the different languages in classrooms. Returning to the

study by López (1988), we understand that linguistic policy is closely related to educational planning. From this planning, assumptions are derived on whether it is possible to modify, dictate and establish a hierarchy of the asymmetrical languages that coexist within a State. As a result, there is a major gap in the management of linguistic diversity which is surprising in Argentina, a country of many languages. While Spanish is the official language, there are indigenous languages and migrant languages (both Indo – Aryan as well as indigenous). In effect, the official IBE guidelines do not clarify whether the instruction language should be the indigenous language; whether teaching models of Spanish as a second language should be applied; whether literacy should be bilingual or multilingual; or whether the indigenous languages are to be treated as the second language.

Although IBE does not represent a clear proposal for addressing sociolinguistic pluralism, we can discern (not because it is specified but by omission) an ideal: children from rural indigenous communities who speak only an indigenous language make contact with Spanish at school for the first time. In this regard, it is useful to note that according to the Supplementary Survey of Indigenous People in Argentina (INDEC, 2004/2005), 73 per cent of indigenous people affirm that they do not speak or understand an indigenous language compared to 20 per cent that affirm to have these competencies and 7 per cent who do not speak but do understand a native tongue.

In spite of these data on linguistic competencies in aboriginal languages, there is only one mention on this linguistic shift in the Argentine legislation: “[Education] can be considered bilingual when there is a conscious will to recover a language in cases of language shift” (Resolution No. 549, 2004, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology). In other words, the condition for intervention is the conscious will to recover the language. This perspective ignores the hegemonic processes of domination and stigmatization that mediate a “conscious will” and the negative opinions or connotations underlying the use of minority languages. These tongues have undergone historic processes of subjugation and repression under homogenizing policies, and, in addition, they continue to lose ground today due to their association with backwardness, discrimination and poverty.

In brief, denying the sociolinguistic complexity leads many children who would receive IBE to be expelled from the public school system with arguments that the child suffers from supposed “cognitive deficiencies”. In fact, the causes could be attributed to the diverse sociolinguistic situations that are totally overlooked within the system. This is evidenced by the level of grade retention and illiteracy in districts where aboriginal languages are spoken along with dialectic variations of Spanish (attributable to contact with indigenous languages). The figures from these districts are twice and sometimes three times the national rates (Acuña and Sierra, 2002), which could be considered an epiphenomenon of this denial of sociolinguistic diversity.

3.5 Teacher profiles

In the IBE classrooms of Argentina, there are two kinds of teachers: indigenous teachers and non-indigenous teachers. Although the former has different titles in different provinces – Aboriginal Assistant Teacher and Intercultural Bilingual Professor (Chaco), Special Teacher for Aboriginal Education (Formosa), Bilingual Assistant Teacher (Salta), etc. – this is the teacher entrusted with teaching the indigenous language and so-called “cultural contents”. The non-indigenous instructor teaches Spanish and all

other subjects (mathematics, social studies, science, etc.) The coexistence of these two teachers is very complex and we describe some of the myriad tensions at both the personal and professional levels in the following text.

With respect to the indigenous teachers, it is interesting to note that the goal of hiring these instructors was to reduce the communication gap between a monolingual Spanish teacher and monolingual students who spoke an indigenous language. The question of their teacher training arose later (Serrudo, 2010 and Zidarich, 2010). That is to say, IBE has been forced to invent its instructors. Not only is the quantity of these instructors insufficient to address the needs of the different schools but the initial training these instructors receive is also lacking. There continues to be very little state-organized training for indigenous teachers and the country has only one official institution for this purpose[5]. This gap in teacher training is often filled with projects funded by universities, foundations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which do take charge of training, but from different ideological perspectives and with different goals in mind. The corollary is that this indigenous instructor is an ill-defined figure, making his/her role within the educational institutions unclear and endangering his/her rights as an educational representative of IBE.

At the same time, this precarious position causes tension between indigenous and non-indigenous instructors. There are tensions owed to the impression (on the part of non-indigenous teachers) that the indigenous instructors are not qualified; there is also strain between the first generation of IBE teachers and those who have recently been trained as indigenous instructors. Part of this tension is owed to the fact that there are no regulations on the integration of indigenous teachers at schools; each province has its own diverse criteria for hiring. The vulnerable and discretionary hiring of the indigenous teacher contrasts harshly with the scoring and accreditation that are part of the official job hiring process for non-indigenous public school teachers.

With regard to non-indigenous teachers, their training continues at teaching schools with a monocultural orientation that does not contemplate the sociolinguistic diversity of students; in only a few exceptional cases are there classes that provide intercultural training for future teachers. As a result, these teachers are generally wary of IBE proposals because they feel IBE threatens their teaching role in several ways. First, they believe that their job posts could be endangered by the figure of the indigenous instructor. Second, their traditional role is shaken by the tension between learning to read and write in Spanish or learning Spanish as a second language – especially because they have not been trained for the latter.

Another ongoing debate is related to the asymmetrical roles of the two types of teachers. Beyond the ideal role of indigenous instructors (teach the indigenous tongue and important cultural contents), their day-to-day tasks in classrooms are not entirely clear. Their tasks at schools vary significantly and only some do nothing but teach in classrooms; there have been reported cases in which indigenous teachers work at the reception desk or tidy up; serve as secretaries or assistants to teachers or administrators (pouring coffee, filling out forms, etc.); or serve as a “bridge” or translator for children whose mother tongue is not Spanish.

In short, to keep the words “bilingual” and “intercultural” from becoming empty or ornamental adjectives for schools in the indigenous education category, it is necessary to contemplate:

The fundamental role of teachers in implementing any educational innovation [...]. Without the support and conviction of teachers, IBE runs the risk of getting stuck in political and academic discourse and, although it may lead to a few interesting actions, it will not effect the radical change that is desired and necessary. Given that its main sphere of application is still schools, this is the place where teachers can contribute to strengthening the processes of social change that the communities are demanding. (Nucinkis, 2007 in Serrudo, 2010).

For all these reasons, it is essential to support, value and respect the indigenous and non-indigenous instructors so that their actions can contribute to building an inclusive valuable IBE.

4. Conclusions: challenges and future perspectives

This summary of IBE in Argentina leads to many questions. In the first place, it is essential to redefine the scope of this educational policy by considering different dimensions such as the recipients, geographical aspects and the levels of the educational system. From the point of view of recipients, IBE should contemplate the entire society and not only those who bear the ethnic marker as possible targets of intercultural education. In terms of geography, it is necessary to include the indigenous (and migrant) populations that dwell in urban areas, undoing the stereotypes and generalizations that associate otherness with the countryside. As for the different levels of the educational system, it must be understood that IBE is an education that goes beyond the first few years at school and encompasses a student's entire schooling career.

IBE will be limited if it cannot surpass the framework of the school institution and embrace the sociocultural diversity of its surroundings in a political sense. In other words, it should not be approached from only educational perspectives but also from ethno-political ones. Thus, IBE should not be understood as an end in itself but as a means to effect change in society (Acuña, 2005 and Dietz, 2012). In this regard, we concur with Alonso and Diaz (2004) that IBE is about more than making curricular contents anthropological (by incorporating culture, difference and otherness to students' vocabulary). It goes beyond making the methods of transmission constructivist or swapping attitudes of intolerance for attitudes of respect for otherness. It is not only necessary to think about what is taught and how it is taught, but why and from what perspective of IBE it is taught in the contemporary context. In other words, it is important to politicize the intercultural discourse and consider that it is not only a question of education but a social and political one as well.

Now, as this article has shown, IBE in Argentina seems to serve more as a policy of acknowledgement aimed at redressing historical wrongs than as a policy that looks to construct an ethnically pluralist society in the future. As a result, we could say that no progress has been made in designing IBE in the past 30 years; instead, the concept has been worn down to the point of disrepute, fueling the mistrust and repudiation of some indigenous organizations (Acuña, 2005). That is to say, a good portion of IBE is at risk of becoming devaluated proposals that ultimately increase educational fragmentation. This is because their implementation depends exclusively on the will of provincial governments; the initiative of school teachers and administrators; or the demands of indigenous parents. For this reason, it is not possible to speak of "a policy" of intercultural education in Argentina. There is no single educational guideline; instead, there are different projects and different places with widely different features. In all

cases, the general guidelines of the federal and provincial administrations are but a faded shadow that accompanies the actions.

It thus seems important to adopt a perspective that decolonizes IBE and considers the relations of subalternity outside of school. That is, IBE has to be recognized as a field of rights that were fought for and won by indigenous collectives. It is impossible to proceed as if schools were isolated from the historical and sociocultural contexts, thus omitting the inferiorization and subordination that affect indigenous groups. This decolonizing focus is important because it allows for a break with colonialist discourses that cancel out differences. This will help transform political, social, economic and cultural relations, politicizing the intercultural discourse not only in educational – pedagogical terms but also in sociopolitical ones (Walsh, 2010; Dietz, 2012). Thus, the goal is not to simply acknowledge and tolerate difference within the established framework but to demolish the colonial structures inherent to power to conceptualize diversity from another perspective. This seems to be the biggest challenge for IBE if it is to become a policy with future perspectives for constructing a more equal society.

Notes

1. In Argentina, the criteria used for the identification of indigenous people on the census are self-recognition of their belonging to an aboriginal group and/or acknowledgment of an ancestor who belonged to such a group.
2. Resolution No. 107 of Argentina's Federal Council of Culture and Education (1999), Resolution No. 549 of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of Argentina (2004), Argentina's National Education Law No. 26,206 (2006), the Document for the Intercultural Bilingual Education System in the National Educational System of the Federal Council of Education (2010) and Resolution No. 105 of the Federal Council of Culture and Education (2010).
3. We are referring to ethnographic research and management/interventions done since 2001 in the field of linguistic and educational anthropology with the Wichis and Chorotes (Salta), Wichis (Formosa) and Tobas (Buenos Aires and Chaco).
4. The structure of the Argentine educational system involves four levels (preschool, elementary school, high school and higher education) and eight categories (IBE, Technical Professional Educations, Artistic Education, Special Education, Ongoing Youth and Adult Education, Rural Education, Correctional Education and Home and Hospital Schooling).
5. We are referring to the Research and Training Center for the Indigenous Category (Centro de Investigación y Formación para la Modalidad Aborigen) in Chaco. This pioneering institution established precedents for the training of indigenous teachers – there is a degree program for intercultural bilingual teachers for General Basic Education (Levels 1 and 2) – but only three indigenous languages native to the province are addressed here (Wichí, Toba and Mocoví).

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