Intercultural Bilingual Education: A Strategy for Reducing Discrimination against Indigenous Students in Bolivia?

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- Research Question: Is the Intercultural Bilingual Education Program reducing discrimination against indigenous students in Bolivia?

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Discrimination Against Indigenous People: A Problem Worldwide

- Indigenous people are generally poorer, less educated and less healthy than non-indigenous people.

- Account for 5 per cent of the world’s population, but 15 per cent of the world’s poor.

- Constitute one third of the world’s 900 million extremely poor rural people.
Indigenous People in Bolivia: A Marginalized Majority

- Account for 62 per cent of the population. Speak 35 different languages.

- Yet education is hispanicized and discriminatory. Higher drop-out and failure rates and lower self-confidence among indigenous students.

- Indigenous children have 3.7 fewer years of schooling than non-indigenous children.
Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE): A Solution?

- **Rationale:** When students are taught in a language they understand, they are more confident, participative and creative. Students who learn the basic skills in their mother tongue have a more solid didactic foundation, making the eventual transition to Spanish easier.

- **The approach:**
  - Grades 1-3: students are taught in their indigenous tongue with Spanish as a subject matter.
  - Grades 4-6: students are taught equally in both languages.
  - Grade 7 onwards: students are taught primarily in Spanish, with their indigenous tongue as a subject matter.

- IBE is Introduced as state policy in rural schools in 1994
Methodology

- Choice of case study: Based on positive reports by the UN, World Bank and IMF

- Choice of La Paz: Large city, in which 60-80 per cent of residents identify as indigenous. Seat of Bolivia’s Federal Government.

- Data collection:
  - 55 Interviews with government officials, Indigenous leaders, NGOs, consultants, teachers, parents, students, teachers’ unions
  - Program Observations
Positive Quantitative Impacts

- By 2002: 192,238 students were benefiting from IBE in 2899 schools.

- Increase in enrolment rates and decrease in drop out rates in areas of high indigenous presence.

- Indigenous students in IBE schools scored higher on standardized tests than they did in non-IBE schools.

- 35 per cent of EIB students achieved a “satisfactory” result, while only 19 per cent of non-EIB students did.
A Program Plagued by Problems

Conceptual Problems:

• Should IBE be applied to *all* languages in Bolivia, or would the money be better spent elsewhere (ex: poverty alleviation)?
• Does imposing IBE lead to reverse-discrimination for non-indigenous students?
• The question of how to standardize oral Indigenous languages becomes highly political

Management Problems

• Fierce political opposition: New governments refuse to build on former governments’ work.
• Instability within the Ministry of Education
• Lack of monitoring after teachers’ unions chased away the “Asesores Pedagógicos”
A Program Plagued by Problems (Continued)

Human Resources Problems
- Shortage of qualified teachers. Many teachers speak their mother tongue but are unable to read and write it, since they went to school at a time when the only language of instruction was Spanish.

Public Opinion Problems
- Perceived as an imposition from the international community
- Parents associate indigenous languages with their historical disadvantage and worry that their children won’t learn Spanish and be able to succeed in life
- Disagreements with regards to the goal of IBE: More efficient integration into mainstream society or revalorization of indigenous languages and cultures?
The Status of EIB in Bolivia Today

- **Inconsistency**: Its application depends on individual teachers.
- **Legal vacuum**: Former law no longer applies, but new law has yet to come into effect.
- **New law will emphasize productive education, interculturality, decolonization and public participation**.
- **Optimism among most actors**.
Discussion

• What to do when the very people a program seeks to help oppose it?

• How to reconcile the opposing visions of what EIB’s goal should be (easier assimilation into majority culture vs. revalorization of indigenous languages and cultures)?

• Is it reasonable to extend EIB to all indigenous languages in countries where resources are scarce? If the answer is no, does this mean some indigenous languages should be allowed to die?
Conclusion

- Intercultural Bilingual Education has the potential to reduce discrimination against indigenous children in Bolivia, as demonstrated by its positive pedagogical impacts.

- However, before it is able to do so effectively, some important problems need to be worked out: conceptual problems, management problems, human resources problems and public opinion problems.