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Interculturalism, Democracy and Values Education in Mexico

Interculturalidad, democracia y formación valoral en México

Silvia Schmelkes del Valle

schmel@data.net.mx

Instituto de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo de la Educación
Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México

Cárpatos 15,
Col. Los Alpes, 01010
México, D. F., México

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Abstract

The following essay analyzes the changes which are necessary within the education system and the curricula since Mexico defined itself, constitutionally, a pluricultural country in 1992. The main proposal consists in the introduction of an intercultural approach on education for indigenous people as well as the general population. After revising the situation of inequality in education for indigenous peoples, it is suggested to fight educational and value imbalance from the perspective of education. As far as the indigenous people are concerned, national education objectives must be achieved timely, as well as full bilingualism, knowledge and valorization of culture. In regard to general population, including the indigenous peoples, this essay identifies three stages: knowledge about diversity, respect for diversity and diversity appreciation.

Key words: Intercultural education, indigenous education, moral education.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza los cambios necesarios en el sistema educativo y en el currículum a raíz de que México se definió a sí mismo, a nivel constitucional, como país pluricultural en 1992. La propuesta central estriba en la introducción de un enfoque intercultural en la educación, tanto de los indígenas como de la población en general. Después de revisar la situación de inequidad que guarda la educación destinada a los pueblos indígenas, sugiere que habrá que proponerse, desde la educación, combatir tanto la asimetría escolar como la asimetría valorativa. Con los indígenas debe perseguirse el logro de objetivos educativos nacionales con pertinencia, pero también el bilingüismo pleno, así como el conocimiento y la valoración de su cultura y su identidad. Respecto a la población en general, incluyendo la indígena, en este ensayo se identifican tres etapas: el conocimiento de la diversidad, el respeto a la diversidad y el aprecio por la diversidad.

Palabras clave: Educación intercultural, educación indígena, educación en valores.

Introduction: Pluriculturalism and Interculturalism

Mexico is known as a pluricultural nation on its Political Constitution since 1992, apropos of the commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the encounter between two worlds: "The Nation has a pluricultural composition based originally on its indigenous peoples" according to its Political Constitution (*Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, 1957, Art. 2).

Mexico has always been a pluricultural territory, since pre-hispanic times. It is the most indigenous country in Latin America (it has more than 10 million people) (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 2008), and it is the most diverse also, it has 68 ethnolinguistic groups which are clearly differentiated (Catálogo de lenguas indígenas nacionales, 2008). However, this pluriculturalism had never been accepted before. The recognition of the fact that Mexico is a pluricultural country represents a fundamental historical change on the concept of the country itself, which was characterized by a permanent attempt to homogenize culture during the last 500 years. Since 1992, Mexico is proud of being a culturally diverse country. This has deep implications in the country's general life, but especially in education which, from that moment on, had to assume the strengthening of the languages and cultures that give the country its pluricultural character.

To recognize the country as a pluricultural one represents a great step; however, pluriculturalism is a descriptive concept that makes reference to the coexistence and living together of different cultures within a specific territory. A country may be pluricultural, and even be recognized as such on an important document like its Constitution, but still discriminate, have racial prejudices, and dominate over other cultures. This is in fact what occurs in Mexico: it was defined a pluricultural country, but the relationships among the members of the dominant majority mestizo culture and those of the minority culture are still based on prejudices and they are mainly racial.

Intercultural relationships are established through laws, regulations, and institution's functioning; besides, they are reflected on individuals' attitudes also. Individual relationships, laws and regulations as well as institutional proceedings are based on the conviction, and not because of the fact that it is unconscious it is less destructive, that indigenous cultures are inferior to the mestizo people who are more capable, the mestizo culture is superior.

A society as the Mexican one, like many others in Latin America which seek democracy and are pluricultural, should move on to interculturalism.

Interculturalism is a concept that refers to the interaction among groups and people that belong to different cultures. Interculturalism describes these relationships. It assumes that intercultural relationships must be based on respect, and developed in equality circumstances, as well as be mutually enriching. It implies the fact that one must accept that the other, who is *different*, has the right to be different. Also, it means accepting that every culture, as well as ever person is, at least *a priori*, equally deserving and worthy. Interculturalism does not admit imbalances of any kind—economic, political, social or cultural ones—(Schmelkes, 2004).

Economic, political, social and cultural imbalances must be fought through civic and political activities of citizens. Education is expected to contribute to fight such imbalance. This is one of the intercultural education objectives.

Education must fight directly two kinds of imbalances: those related to the quantity and quality of indigenous peoples' education—*educational imbalance*, so as to call it a name—, and *value imbalance* (Schmelkes, 2004).

The *educational imbalance* is the one that explains why indigenous peoples have fewer opportunities of attending school, greater difficulties to stay in it and progress. This imbalance also explains why indigenous children learn less at school, and why what they learn turns out to be less useful for them for a current and future quality of life. In the case of Mexico, this imbalance has been an object of study in multiple research (Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe, 2003; Schmelkes, Noriega, Lavin and Martínez, 1997; INEE, 2006, 2007; Parker, Rubalcava and Teruel, 2003). Table I summarizes some indicators of this imbalance:

Table I. Several indicators for indigenous education excluding

Indicator	Non-Indigenous language speaking population	Indigenous language speaking population
Population aged between six and 14 who attend school	4.9%	8.3%
Retention-attainment at elementary school	95%	89%
Probability of completing elementary school within six years	0.71	0.51
Illiteracy from eight to 14 years old	2.4%	13.5%
Population aged between 15 to 19 who attend school	46.9%	73.7%
Illiteracy in population aged 15 or older	6.7%	31.6%

Source: *Observatorio Ciudadano de la Educación* (2008).

The studies carried out by the National Institute of Assessment of Education INEE, for its acronym in Spanish *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación*, (INEE, 2006, 2007) show that students from indigenous schools, at third grade as well as at sixth grade, are always below the average, remarkably and significantly, of the rest of the schools: community courses, rural public schools, urban public schools, and private schools.

The *value imbalance* refers to the fact that there are social groups—in Mexico's case, most of the population—that consider that their culture is superior to that of the rest. In many cases, subjective superiority of those who have greater economic and political power, which constitutes the main cause of racism and discrimination, takes people from the minority cultures to adopt attitudes of inferiority—which has been called introjected racism—and they show low self-esteem before those who are of the dominant culture. Both, introjected racism as well as subjective superiority, prevent relationships among the peoples of different cultures from taking place within an equality context and based on mutual respect. This imbalance, the one related to value, is the largest obstacle for interculturalism.

I. Interculturalism and Democracy

If society does not change to a greater interculturalism, true democracy will not be possible:

a) Democracy is based upon *pluralism*, and it is developed precisely because human beings don't think alike. Consequently, democracy must reflect the existent pluralism of the country. An important fact of pluralism in Mexico, as well as in many other countries, is its pluriculturalism. Pluralism cannot exist as long as imbalance exists. Those who have been stigmatized, those who have a voice but cannot be heard within the society they belong to, lack of the mechanisms to defend what is theirs. Pluralism cannot exist if people and groups who consider

themselves superior exist, because by doing so they are not capable of listening to the others who are different and of learning from them (Schmelkes, 2005).

b) Democracy assumes the existence of, at least, *tolerance*. Tolerance is itself an opposite of racism: superficial, but opposite at the end. Tolerance implies the recognition of the right of every citizen to express his/her opinion, and to vote. Where racism exists, this right is not accepted.

c) However, democracy also implies *respect*. It is an opposite of racism and it is more profound than democracy, since it goes further the recognition of one's right to express opinions. Respect is different from racism, because besides the fact of accepting the other's right to express, it implies an interest for listening the opinion and expression of others. There where the other who's different or thinks differently is not shown respect, there cannot be true democracy.

d) Democracy, at the same time, signifies *justice* and it is a mechanism to pursue. Justice is the finish line which is characterized, among other things, by the lack of imbalance. It implies civic maturity, since one's participation in making decisions, which is clearly a demand of democracy, cannot be limited to defend one's own interests or the interests of a group, but also it assumes fighting for the rights and interests of those who are being affected by status quo. Racism in our society is embedded in law, institutional structures, and on how institutions work. Racism is in the heart of every political decision that affects minorities, among them indigenous peoples.

Racism derives from the subjective impairment of separating economic poverty from cultural poverty. Racism does not accept the fact that there might be people or groups who are economically poor but culturally wealthy. Racists are convinced of the superiority of their culture, and they consider that belonging to a different culture constitutes an obstacle to participate within society and to receive the benefits of its development. In a country like Mexico, where mixed races have made it difficult to distinguish between a native and a mestizo due to phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, mestizo people expect indigenous people to decide to become mestizo. Being mestizo is a cultural characteristic, it's not a physical one (Schmelkes, 2009).

School has been the main environment where to convince indigenous people to become mestizo, and to prepare them for it. In this way, and mainly since the Department of Public Education in 1921 when education reached indigenous areas, school has become one of the main causes for the linguistic banishment and the loss of our cultural diversity. Mestizophilia is one of the most important manifestations of Mexican racism.

In a racial society, true democracy is not feasible. Racism in Mexico is natural. No one admits to be racist. Everyone recognizes his or her indigenous origins and admits enjoying and even adopting cultural indigenous customs, such as food, and celebrations; for instance, the day of the dead. This is one of the reasons why it is

so difficult to fight racism. Also, it is the reason why intercultural education must be proposed for the entire population and not only for indigenous peoples. Also, it explains the fact that intercultural education is an education for democracy. Intercultural education equals an education with values.

II. Education for Interculturalism

Why should people be educated for interculturalism? Education can fight the two educational imbalances that have been described above. Also, it can educate future citizens who are committed to fight against other imbalances. Education can instruct for democracy and citizenship, and it can educate with values. For this reason, it is important to instruct on interculturalism.

Education for interculturalism implies different challenges for different populations. Basically due to the long history of discrimination and cultural domination in Mexico, work must be focused at the beginning and for a long time mainly on indigenous peoples in order to help them to value their own culture, which thanks to introjected racism, has been even despised by themselves in many cases.

Consequently, as far as indigenous peoples are concerned, education must fight against the homogenization which has prevailed in the past. It is true that there must be educational objectives which must remain equal for every student in the country. However, these objectives are more related with basic skills and knowledge, as well as moral values (social values) oriented toward coexistence than with the transfer of knowledge. The latter is much vulnerable to cultural bias—or to the attempts to imposition—. However, education for indigenous people must pursue balanced bilingualism as a result of the first stages.

Language is the most effective and economic way to refer to a culture and language proficiency is what allows a culture to keep dynamic and strengthen. When a language is lost, it is likely that the culture will stop being referred to, and eventually it will be lost also. On the other hand, it is essential that indigenous people speaks Spanish as *lingua franca* in a plurilingual country, since only in this way will equal opportunities and rights be allowed within a wider society.

However, the proficiency of one's own language is not enough. Also, it is highly important that one knows the culture of his own—that school constitutes itself as an institution that reproduces its own culture, apart from the national and the rest of the world's cultures—and one can value his own identity. If this is not achieved, relationships with others—in this case the members of the dominant culture- will not be feasible from the perspective of equality.

Indigenous people must be able to relate to others who are historically dominant because of the strength of their individual and cultural self esteem. These educational goals, on the other hand, must be pursued at all educational levels and not only, at elementary school like it was done until recently.

An essential condition to fight against educational imbalance among the indigenous peoples is to ensure a high quality education, one which ensures not only the learning outcomes expected, but which also brings and keeps the indigenous population at school as long as necessary in order to achieve them—at least at elementary education—. However, quality cannot be achieved in the same way and through the same mechanisms within the different cultural contexts. Education for indigenous people must be linguistically and culturally relevant; it must be useful for the student's current and future life. It must help students develop the skills not only related to thinking, but also to their own values, knowledge, wisdom, view of the world; as well as those which help them facilitate dialogue with different knowledge and values produced by other cultures and which provide them with opportunities of significant learning.

As far as the mestizo population is concerned, which in Mexico is the majority; it needs to go through three stages and two epistemological changes. The first stage refers to knowledge on diversity. It is difficult to ask someone to respect another one who turns to be unknown. However, until recently, elementary education curricula, as well as other programs from other levels, had not included knowledge on the indigenous people who live nowadays in the country. Indigenous people complain because they say: "students learn about the indigenous ancestors who are dead, but not about the living ones". Knowledge on indigenous cultures—this is what indigenous people know and believe, their myths and rituals, vision of history, what they value and how they teach it, their view of the world—must be included cross-sectionally in every course form the curricula, every grade level and at all levels. The purpose is not knowledge transfer, but to develop the ability to value cultural diversity and cultural richness, as well as the desire to get to know more about Mexican culture.

The second stage consists on the respect for the others who are different. Respect is feasible once knowledge is developed. However, respect it is not an automatic consequence of knowledge. It is necessary to develop it intentionally and systematically. An epistemological step from knowledge to respect must be taken.

This is why values education plays an important role within the educational process. The development of deep moral criteria is based on the essential respect to others. A person is the only one responsible for the construction of a scheme of values of his or her own. School; however, is obliged to provide with wide information and multiple opportunities to reflect on, as well as to dialogue and discuss values and moral dilemmas, from the most simple to the most complex ones, including what is farther and closer in time and space. This may occur in elementary education and secondary education, at least, in order to allow the discovery of every person's dignity, and, consequently, respect as well as the value of justice. These are the main fundamentals to judge one's actions as well as those of others, and hopefully people will act according to them (Kohlberg, 1992).

Respect is also developed when the existence of respectful societies is discovered. School is a micro society where respect can be a basic principle of coexistence and which regulates interpersonal and group relationships within it and be in connection with the community.

The third stage is the appreciation of diversity. Respect is important; however, it is not enough. A second epistemological step from respect to diversity appreciation is needed. Diversity appreciation is the consequence of living learning experiences with the others who are different. When this is possible within a classroom or at school due to its heterogeneous cultural composition, this is relatively easy to achieve. Heterogeneous classrooms and schools are in this sense privileged, since they are able to live the transition of pluriculturalism to interculturalism.

However, when the classroom has a homogeneous cultural composition, then it will be necessary to import diversity to the classroom life, through resources such as literature, simulations, novels, poems, and newspapers, moral dilemmas, videos and films, among others. They help students to be in contact with the different forms of assessing, producing, solving problems, and understanding the world. They will always enrich and they must be widely used at classrooms.

Diversity appreciation is what helps to fight racism. Once one appreciates the other who's different, because of his or her own differences, one learns something new and grows as a person. It is natural to transfer this esteem for who enriches one's life to those who share the same difference, and consequently racism is taken apart.

Intercultural education must be delivered to the entire population, or it is not intercultural. The three stages mentioned above must be developed within every social group, including the indigenous people. The only difference is that, when referring to the indigenous ones, the starting point is the appreciation of their own culture, which has been historically oppressed and despised, and for this same reason it requires of strengthening and appreciation.

In pluricultural countries—and practically every country is— values education must be included in intercultural education, and if not, true democracy is not feasible as it has been stated before. It is true that schools are not the only social institutions, which should pursue this goal; however, without any doubt, they represent the only social institution that can do it explicitly, systematically and transparently. Intercultural education has become one of the major challenges in a society becoming more complex and diverse every day.

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