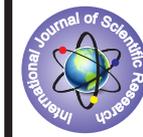


Mexican Indigenous Children and Elementary Bilingual Education



Education

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ABSTRACT

Education plays a vital role in today's society and it is an important tool that can be used to heal and to bring the community together. The truly human society is a learning society where everyone is given the opportunity to learn from each other and to contribute to their community. Education in essence is a social and enriching process where interaction between the individual and other people and the environment are key. Nonetheless, many times the true meaning and the purpose of education has been forgotten. An example of this is the transitional bilingual education that has been implemented in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples in Mexico where indigenous children have been discriminated against and their linguistic and cultural rights have been violated. This has damaged their personality and behavior, for example, children have become shy, quiet and isolated in the classroom due to the education they receive and the way they are treated. Many indigenous children's voices have been taken away since they have been taught in a language they do not understand. They have been silenced since their human, linguistic and cultural rights have been violated. This situation motivated conducting a qualitative ethnographic research study to explore the elementary indigenous Tsotsil children's educational experiences in a school located in the Highlands of Chiapas in southeast Mexico. The aim was to analyze the social and academic consequences of using or not children's native language and culture in their learning process. That is, it was aimed to find to what extent indigenous Tsotsil children are affected when their native language and culture were or were not considered in their elementary education. Over the course of one semester, children were observed passively and actively and were also interviewed by the main researcher. Students' teachers were observed passively when teaching and were interviewed during the semester. Also, the school principal participated in this project. The findings give hope that education can contribute to the defense of indigenous children's cultural and linguistic rights since the results of this project show that it is possible to embrace, preserve and promote children's indigenous language and culture through additive bilingual education. Also, the students especially those who were about to finish their elementary studies showed that the lack of financial resources is not a limitation for bi/multilingualism to take place when hard-work and commitment exist. The same is applicable to the teachers who work at the focus school. They do their best to maintain and promote the indigenous language despite the factors that do not favor the implementation of bilingual education. It is important to recognize that these teachers "perform magic with the little resources they have", for example, with the few teaching materials they have. Also, they are instructors who care for their students, not only for the success of their academic performance at school, but also for their well-being as children. Teachers at the bilingual school have made significant contributions to the lives of their students and they have also ensured that they are given a voice it is common for extrovert indigenous children to become shy, silent and alienated in the school as the language they are taught in and spoken to is foreign to them. Fortunately, the indigenous children at the focus bilingual school do have a voice and their personality and behavior are positively affirmed as teachers maintain and promote the use of the native language and culture.



Image 1. Tsotsil children during homage (Del Carpio, 2015)

Childhood and Education

Childhood is considered to be one of the most important and significant stages in the life of every individual. Therefore, what he or she experiences either positively or negatively during childhood affects not only his/her present, but also his/her future. Children can be described as "unique individuals with their own rhythms and strategies; as rapidly changing and growing; as social dependent" (Lane Community College, n.d., para. 1) and in the process of developing trust. Children need attention, social contact with adults who tune in on their uniqueness and sense of well-being. They also need physical contact, eye contact, movement and stimulation; they need response from people, daily communication with parents, trust and security (Lane Community College, n.d.). When focusing on early elementary children, it can be said that many of them are curious, energetic, active, exploratory, playful, enjoy humor, have sense of justice and find their peers to be important and their self-esteem can be affected if their basic scholastic skills are not appropriately taught (Lane Community College, n.d.).

Children have their own characteristics; characteristics that should be reinforced if they contribute to their growth as human beings. This is one of the many reasons why it is imperative to ensure children receive quality education; an education where they are respected, cared for and also loved; education that helps them develop the skills they already have as well as new ones. Indeed, education can be used as a powerful tool to maintain or develop a high level of self-esteem in children and nurture their moral values, too. At the same time, education can preserve and promote children's first language and culture by using them as valuable resources in the teaching and learning process. As Ruiz (1984) describes language is a human right and a significant resource that should be used and promoted in education. However, the type of education that has been delivered to children in certain parts of the world have affected them negatively, that is, rather than contributing to children's personal and educational growth, they have been hurt in different aspects of their lives.

Transitional bilingual education has been one of the programs that has served the purpose described above, in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples in Latin America, for instance. Mexico and its pueblos originarios, that is, its indigenous peoples, are a clear example of that. Indigenous children have been discriminated against and their linguistic and cultural rights have been violated at the "bilingual school" (Del Carpio, 2012). To be more specific, the personality and behavior of children who have attended this type of schools have been damaged. In other words, they have become shy, quite and segregated due to the education they have been given and the way they have been treated.

Many indigenous children's voices have been taken away since they have been taught in a language they do not understand. They have been silenced since their human, linguistic and cultural rights have

been violated. Therefore, if transitional bilingual education and bilingual schools have contributed to increase children's feelings of shyness, isolation and lack of desire to talk, it is also their responsibility to take action to improve this situation. By doing so, children's native language and culture could be maintained and promoted through education, which is fundamental, since in most cases that is the language and culture they identify themselves with. Also, this would contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, rights and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2017).

UNESCO (2017) reminds us that bilingual and multilingual education based on mother tongue is characterized by "linking local knowledge, addressing common challenges and acting together to find solutions" (para. 3) and that "it is through mastery of the first or mother language that the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy are acquired" (UNESCO, 2017, para. 4). On the other hand, languages especially "minority and indigenous languages - transmit cultures, values and traditional knowledge, thus playing an important role in promoting sustainable futures" (UNESCO, 2017, para. 5). Also, "education and information in the mother language is absolutely essential to improving learning and developing confidence and self-esteem, which are among the most powerful engines of development" (Bokova, 2017 as cited in UNESCO, 2017, para. 6). Cultural diversity is positive since it is considered to be the basis for all creativity (Fall, 2017 as cited in UNESCO, 2017, para. 7).

Research Study on Elementary Bilingual School

Bilingualism and multilingualism as well as quality bi/multilingual education offer benefits at the individual and group level. Unfortunately, the wrong implementation of bi/multilingual education, for instance, bilingual transitional bilingual programs can negatively affect students, which has been the case of indigenous children in Chiapas, Mexico. Since this has been the situation, conducting a qualitative ethnographic research study was necessary in order to explore the to explore the elementary indigenous Tsotsil children's educational experiences in a school located in the Highlands of Chiapas in southeast Mexico.

About the study

The aim was to analyze the social and academic consequences of using or not children's native language and culture in their learning process. That is, it was aimed to find to what extent indigenous Tsotsil children are affected when their native language and culture were or were not considered in their elementary education. Over the course of one semester, one class of 25 Tsotsil indigenous third graders were observed passively and actively and were also interviewed by the main researcher. Students' Tsotsil teacher was observed passively when teaching and was interviewed during the semester. In addition, the school principal participated in this project.

The conversations I had with the participants were recorded and translated from Spanish or Tsotsil into English. The interviews were transcribed in order to analyze them through content analysis, which Berg (2009) defines as "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (p.338).

Summary of findings and discussion

The school principal, the teachers and the students who took part in this research study are a good example that the improvement of bilingual education and that additive bilingualism are both possible. Students showed that the lack of financial resources is not a limitation for bi/multilingualism to take place when hard-work and commitment exist.

The same is applicable to the teachers who work at the focus school. They do their best to maintain and promote the indigenous language despite the factors that do not favor the implementation of bilingual education. It is necessary to recognize that these teachers "perform magic with the little resources they have", for example, with the few

teaching materials they have. Also, they are instructors who care for their students, not only for the success of their academic performance at school, but also for their well-being as children. It was noticed that most teachers have a close relationship with the students' parents who once in a while go to school to ask about their children or who attend the events at the school. This contributes to the communitarian atmosphere of the school, which evidences the value Tsotsil peoples give to the community rather than to individuality, which is a shared value among indigenous peoples around the world. They act as a group; "as a community to connect and collaborate" (Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, n.d., para. 2). Indigenous groups think of the community and prefer working together as such.

It should be underlined that despite the negative effects that poverty has had and has on some of the indigenous children; many of them have been successful language learners, which in my personal opinion, is a fact that deserves to be recognized and admired. Tsotsil children are an inspirational example that shows that "where there is a will, there is a way." Also, they are a good example that confirms that there is no excuse not to be bilingual or multilingual as they have proved it is possible despite their disadvantageous financial situation and the lack of materials available to them and their teachers (just to mention some of the issues in the bilingual program that are not necessarily in the hands of the instructors to solve).

Teachers at the bilingual school have made significant contributions to the lives of their students and they have also ensured that they are given a voice; a voice that on multiple occasions has been taken away at other bilingual schools and schools in general not only in Mexico or Latin America, but in different parts of the world since indigenous children have been taught in a language that they do not necessarily understand while their native language has been devalued, ignored or discriminated against. This is not only a violation of indigenous children's linguistic human rights, but also a weapon that negatively affects their personality and behavior (just to mention some of the negative results of this). As mentioned earlier in this work, it is common for extrovert indigenous children to become shy, silent and alienated in the school as the language they are taught in and spoken to is foreign to them. This is one of the many reasons that motivated conducting this research to explore if this was the situation of indigenous children at the bilingual school in Tentic and if so it was aimed to investigate the reasons for them to choose to withdraw socially and remain silent (Bosacki, 2008), an important study "in order to develop ameliorative, if not preventive, interventions for these children" (Bosacki, 2008, p. 16). Fortunately, the indigenous children at the focus bilingual school do have a voice and their personality and behavior are positively affirmed as teachers maintain and promote the use of the native language and culture. Tsotsil does have an active role in the bilingual education the children who participated in this research receive.

According to Bosacki (2008), "the relation between children's social behaviors in familiar and unfamiliar novel settings is mediated by the quality of children's peer relationships and their internalized thoughts/perception, and or affects about these relationships" (p. 17). It was observed that teachers at the bilingual school have a close and positive relationship with their students, which has contributed to the sense of the community felt in the classroom and at the school in general. The interactions between indigenous children and their teachers are accompanied by Tsotsil and also Spanish (when the students are bilingual also in Spanish). However, in most of the interactions between the teacher and the students and among students themselves, Tsotsil is the language that is used., which contributes to its strengthening.

This has also facilitated the teaching and learning process and has given an active role to the Tsotsil language. In this regard, Bosacki (2008) argues that "language and social interaction play vital roles in children, for instance, in their emotional understanding" (p. 20). These two components have a positive impact on children's behavior

and personality as they feel accepted, respected and cared for. This is another example of the crucial role that teachers play in the lives of their students. Also, instructors play an important role in “the construction of their students’ social-cognitive and linguistic abilities (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Denham, 1998; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Purkey, 2000)” (Bosacki, 2008, p. 19), which again underlines the value of preparing and supporting teachers to implement quality bilingual education as they have a key role in the lives of their students. This role becomes even more important when it refers to teach to indigenous children who have been in a disadvantaged marginalized situation since historical times.

Final thoughts

The participants in this study show that quality bilingual education is possible and that teachers can empower their students and affirm their identity and strengthen or develop a positive perception of themselves. To achieve this goal, instructors need to be supported so that they can implement quality respectful inclusive education. Colker (2008) argues that we need teachers with passion, patience, perseverance, pragmatism, flexibility, respect, creativity and with willingness to take risks. Also, she states that teachers should have love of learning, authenticity, energy and even a good sense of humor (Colker, 2008). Indeed, we need teachers who care for their students as the instructors who were observed in this research. To conclude, the findings of this work give hope that it is possible to implement quality bilingual education where the minority language and culture are maintained and promoted.

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