

Educational Challenges in the Rarámuri Indigenous Community The Bicultural-Bilingual Approach

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Abstract

Over the years, the educational system in Mexico was known for imposing monoculturalism as a model of development. In this situation, indigenous communities have witnessed the implementation of unrealistic educational programs designed outside the community far from their interests and needs. In addition, educational policies were structured without taking into consideration the national plurality that symbolizes Mexico.

As consequence, the essay provides related information to the rarámuri indigenous community. Indigenous group located in the north of Mexico in the state of Chihuahua with an estimated population of 84,086 indigenous rarámuri. In the essay I present some reflections about the history of rarámuris and the cultural problems encountered during the Spanish occupation. During the colonization period, national education tried to destroy the indigenous figure; thus, native languages ceased to exist mainly because it was thought that in order to achieve development Mexico had to homogenize their populations. As a result, a considerable number of Indigenous lost their cultural identity.

However, new educational policies have brought the bicultural-bilingual system, which has emerged some questions about the implementation of this procedure into an indigenous community. Finally, the essay tries to reflect some of the most challenging educational issues inside the rarámuri community.

Introduction

"Man and Butterflies have several similarities, both looking for a better forest, but then, they return home every year," says an old Rarámuri principle. This indigenous group located in the north of Mexico in the Sierra Tarahumara -inside the majestic Sierra Madre Occidental with an estimated 84,086¹ indigenous rarámuris- is immersed in a tough environment where proliferates loss of cultural identity, lack of employment opportunities, extreme poverty and a recent violence movement caused by the insertion of drug trafficking and narco-cartels in the region.

As consequence, it is assumed the idea of mobility and migration as the only solution to survive; it is no surprise to anyone that cultural preservation of this indigenous society has been eroded by enormous global challenges.

¹ Monárrez, Joel (2000) *Salud pública de México*, Vol. 42 No. 1 Cuernavaca Ene./Feb. 2000
http://www.scielosp.org/scielo.php?pid=S0036-36342000000100004&script=sci_arttext

The rarámuris live together in the southwestern side of the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Etymologically the word "Raramuri" means "light feet" or "foot runner". Like others Latin American indigenous communities, the rarámuris were victims of exploitation, which left them in severe poverty. However, the most brutal aggression came from the Spanish conquistadors, who unable to pronounce their name correctly transformed the word Rarámuri into Tarahumara; that incident brought rarámuris into a process of acculturation. The result simply was a new model of cultural reinterpretation; therefore, rarámuris begin to modify their own values, customs, traditions, festivities and most importantly their own language.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries -during times of conquest and colonization in Mexico- unpleasant social confrontations, such as, disappearance, mobilization and assimilation had a violent impact on the preservation of indigenous language. For Beatriz Garza Cuarón, the period of the Spanish conquest in Mexico was one of the greatest disasters of mankind, where indigenous populations fell from 25.3 million to one million people. ² Eventually, indigenous communities were persecuted, tortured and enslaved in order to abandon all existing cultural model prior Spanish conqueror arrival.

Suddenly, begins the conception of Spanish as a language of hegemony, as a result, the new society has to face the "we-they" ³ dichotomy, which represents a transcendental element that will provide the source of ideologies based on discrimination against indigenous communities.

The other conquest was notable for pursuing monoculturalism, in where indigenous language should not exist inside the New Spain. Similarly, the increasing contribution of religious orders -stimulated by Jesuits, Franciscans and the Josefinos- constituted a cultural transformation in the life of Rarámuris "missionaries tried to concentrate the Tarahumaras in villages around the missions to be able to catechize them, and simultaneously they would use them as a labor force in the mines and the local farms. The Tarahumaras, suddenly, discovered they were not the proprietors of their own territory, and even worse, they will have to adopt several Spanish beliefs." ⁴

Nevertheless, the formalization of the Mexican State -through its independence movement- establishes a difference in order to achieve indigenous populations' rights by confirming ethnic diversity as one symbol of freedom. "*Los Sentimientos de la Nación*" by José María Morelos indicated "that slavery was banned forever, and so the distinction between castes" ⁵ Unfortunately, these intentions of integration and acceptance were radically changed during the first years of independence.

² Organización Editorial Mexicana (2008) México, de los 10 países con mayor diversidad lingüística. El Sol de México, México DF. <http://www.oem.com.mx/oem/notas/n559255.htm>

³ Herrera, Guillermina (2001) El español y las lenguas indígenas hoy. Aulaintercultural. El Portal de la Educación Intercultural, Guatemala. http://www.aulaintercultural.org/article.php3?id_article=693

⁴ Pintado, Ana (2004) Tarahumaras, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas México DF.

⁵ Kubli, Fausto (2000) Pasado, Presente y Futuro de los Derechos Indígenas en México. UNAM, México DF. 287p

As a consequence, the new political discourse in Mexico had some splendid moments; in where, linguistic diversity and multicultural recognition were considered as imperative components to reach national development. However the new organizational system - based on the search of multiculturalism- did not represent the expected results. Enrique Hamel, defines multiculturalism as a structure of acknowledgment to diversity within a given territory, however, it continues to be an obstacle to achieve maturity.⁶

Erroneously, the ideology imposed in the emancipated Mexico was based on the implementation of European models, where, the "high" or "dominant" culture denied the right of expression to ethnic minorities, or, commonly named: lower classes. Unfortunately, Mexican society's roots –towards indigenous cultures and languages- have been marked by the binomial of superiority-inferiority that has led indigenous communities to reject their own languages. Consequently, these minorities -victims of war and discrimination effects- saw their culture severely affected, united to this, the extreme poverty impoverished their social conditions.

Nationally, during the post-revolutionary period, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) promotes early debates about the inclusion of bilingual-bicultural education in Mexico, which will have an obvious impact on future legislations

In 1976, the Department of Indigenous Education is created, a few years later, Mexico in 1990, ratified the Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), agreement that seeks to strengthen national legislature and take necessary action in the recognition of indigenous peoples⁷. Subsequently, in 2003 the General Law of Linguistic Rights for Indigenous Peoples was published, which emphasizes that ethnic groups are entitled to be educated in their mother tongue. Those events were extremely important to establish the vision of a multicultural nation supported in the Article 2 by the Mexican Constitution, which stipulates that: "The nation has a cultural composition based originally on its indigenous people."⁸

Language rights are one of the main concepts that must be implemented by all States in order to reject the foundations of a "national homogeneity".⁹ The method to achieve this progress is restructuring educational programs

Indigenous Education in Mexico and Chihuahua

The challenge of the Mexican education system -in relation to indigenous education- is to provide instruments and tools to enhance the quality of education in rural schools. As reported by the National Institute for Evaluation in Education "indigenous language speakers, 8 to 14 years, have 13.5% illiteracy. In contrast, among non-speaking

⁶ Hamel, Enrique (2000) Políticas del lenguaje y la educación indígena en México. UAM, México DF.

⁷ CDI (s/f) Convenio 169 de la OIT sobre los pueblos indígenas y tribales en países independientes, México

⁸ Observatorio Ciudadano (2008) La Educación Indígena en México: Inconsistencias y retos. México DF.

http://www.observatorio.org/comunicados/EducDebate15_EducacionIndigena.html

⁹ Nava, Fernando (s/f) La Educación, la etnicidad y el derecho a la lengua. UNAM, México DF. 40p

indigenous languages, this percentage is only 2.4".¹⁰ The causes of low literacy among indigenous settlements are due to many reasons, and in each community will exist elements that have no relation with illiteracy rates in other regions and/or ethnic groups; however, we must not forget that common factors are prevalent among indigenous villages that affect school performance, such as, poverty, lack of infrastructure in public schools and migration.

Particularly in the case of rarámuris illiteracy is caused, largely, by economic problems in the family, social effects generated by the invasion of drug trafficking in the region and especially the lack of educational programs that take into consideration a real bicultural-bilingual education.

At first instance, bilingual-bicultural model is defined by being a teaching method that employs the use of native and dominant language with the purpose of facilitating educational learning to social minorities. This intercultural model gives significance value to social and cultural reality of indigenous peoples. For an effective educational program several factors like productive activities, religious festivities and life in general, are seriously considered. It also acknowledges the oral technique (use of language) as an approach for transmitting principles and knowledge among individuals

During 1990-1991, in the state of Chihuahua was formalized the bilingual-bicultural education system to the rarámuri indigenous community.¹¹ However, given the bicultural matter, promoters of the new system conducted an initial diagnosis, where, parents expressed their main concerns and provided important information regarding the main characteristics that should distinguish the courses.

Thus, Tarahumara children must learn:¹²

- ❖ To read and write in Spanish and Rarámuri
- ❖ To Value traditions as the Yúmari (Nativity of St. John the Baptist)
- ❖ To work, to cultivate the land, being able to look after the animals, make furniture, to sew and to take care of the forest.

Inside the evident familiar concerns, we can examine the linguistic aspects -reflected in the first paragraph- where indigenous culture conservation is as relevant as providing Spanish language skills to children and young tarahumaras. Nonetheless, this aspiration has not been entirely successful mainly because the privilege to maintain a native language has to face a variety of obstacles, not only from the government (limited financial resources for rural education in Chihuahua), but also the difficulty of producing

¹⁰ Observatorio Ciudadano (2008) La Educación Indígena en México: Inconsistencias y retos. México DF. http://www.observatorio.org/comunicados/EducDebate15_EducacionIndigena.html

¹¹ Franco, María (1997) Los maestros indígenas de Chihuahua frente al Nuevo modelo educativo. Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa. Vol. 2 N. 4 México, 369p

¹² *Ibíd.*

text books in the rarámuri language, which causes that "there is no socialization of writing tarahumara (...) which helps to deny its existence".¹³

In addition, the problematic of textbooks in rarámuri language has presented a high rejection by teachers in Chihuahua, since some of them only speak Spanish, therefore, they prefer to omit the use of the small number of native-language books available, and they are in favor of using textbooks in Spanish. According to Maria Franco, these actions "contribute to reproduce in the students the idea of Spanish as the language of knowledge, devaluing their own one, also, causing serious problems of comprehension in monolingual children or those who have not yet mastered the Spanish language"¹⁴ Simultaneously, indigenous teachers confront a crossroad between racial loyalty and faithfulness to the national school system, which will eventually characterize a contradictory attitude towards indigenous language.

Bicultural-bilingual system, which supposedly is the main goal in public schools in the country, has not been fully installed. For teachers who do not handle the native language (because the vast majority of indigenous educators domain exclusively the oral language; practically they do not know how to read or write in rarámuri) teaching and learning become in something tedious, difficult and almost impossible to reach for rarámuri students, which generate that learning it limits itself.

Claude Levi-Strauss in "The Savage Mind" presents a world characterized by a high rationality¹⁵. However, their social and cultural characteristics are predetermined by western standards; these elements are imposed by a hegemonic culture that symbolizes all those development standards as universal. The book introduces us to this magical thinking that perhaps is the only solution to solve the chaos that distinguishes contemporary society. Similarly, Levi-Strauss confirms that both the "savage mind" and the scientific mind form part of the same thoughts that promotes the persistence of intellectual abilities, and, proclaims human development as an essential way to produce new knowledge. Levi-Strauss' work reflects an important ingredient for the integration of indigenous thought into academic life.

However, the null dissemination of the rarámuri culture within the education system in Chihuahua is extremely alarming, i.e., Tarahumara culture elements are not considered for the development, planning and implementation of educational programs. As a result, current education offers unrealistic topics for rarámuris.

"Neither is taken into examination their learning styles, which are based more on observation, imitation, exploration and experimentation than in the

¹³ Franco, María (1997) Los maestros indígenas de Chihuahua frente al Nuevo modelo educativo. Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa. Vol. 2 N. 4 México, 369p

¹⁴ *Ibíd.*

¹⁵ Levi-Strauss, Claude (2001) *El Pensamiento Salvaje*, Ed. Porrúa, México DF.

verbal transmission of knowledge. The school emphasizes writing even learning a second language, when indigenous culture is oral”.¹⁶

Once again we are approaching the concerns raised by parents who consider that rural school does not train students on an efficient way to enter the socio-cultural reality in the Sierra Tarahumara. Aspects that strengthen community life, traditions, customs, as well as, learning new job skills, cultivation and planting that, eventually, will link them with the traditional life of rarámuris. “If you do not endure, then you are worthless” it is a proverb used in the Sierra Tarahumara, it is assumed that each person has a commitment with the community.

This commitment is also known as *korima*, value driven by the tarahumaras to preserve cultural life in their community through work, solidarity, respect and community support. In this situation we must ask ourselves if Mexico and Chihuahua have truly followed efficiently the guidelines for a bilingual-bicultural education.

Finally, the linguistic shift toward English language symbolizes the most recent concern from governmental, academic and social institutions in the state of Chihuahua. The reason that has hampered Spanish and Rarámuri survival is due to high rates of indigenous migration to urban centers, such as, Ciudad Juarez, Cuauhtémoc, and principally border cities in the U.S.

However, this migration process is not easy; Tarahumara must leave their family ties and enter into a completely different culture. Although there are more opportunities, with difficulty, they will be freed from the yoke of discrimination; both men and women face exploitation in jobs that require little specialization: manufacturing, construction and domestic services. Consequently, rarámuris start to incorporate foreign values as their own. Loss of the rarámuri language has been a constant factor in second generations who live outside their communities. Eventually, the return of these men to their home (as the principle that compares man with butterflies) is characterized by the implementation of external customs in the Tarahumara region, being one of them the use of English in Tarahumaras’ small communities. This displacement of language "occurs when speakers choose to replace their original language with one that is considered culturally and economically superior. The displaced language is giving space for the desired language".¹⁷ In a personal research study of the tarahumara community of Creel, it was found a tendency to replace rarámuri language to English in small children. This process is originated by the high volume of migration and, recently, international tourism from Canada and the U.S. During my stay in the city of Creel I was entirely surprised to see young rarámuris running into tourist -with their traditional crafts- screaming “buy, buy” (using those world in English), then I could not spot thinking, we live in a global world!.

¹⁶ Observatorio Ciudadano (2008) La Educación Indígena en México: Inconsistencias y retos. México DF. http://www.observatorio.org/comunicados/EducDebate15_EducacionIndigena.html

¹⁷ Villavicencio, Frida (2003) Diversidad Lingüística de México, Un patrimonio poco valorado. Foro Internacional Resistencias y Alternativas. México DF. 191p.

Conclusion

The urgency of creating an authentic program of bilingual-bicultural education that integrates rarámuris within models of development, is vital. It is impossible to discuss issues related to multiculturalism if we see that within the Sierra Tarahumara indigenous groups are dropping out of school due to educational mistakes.

Rural education in Mexico should encourage ethnics' identity preservation. At first instance, it is important to fight those gaps in the Mexican educational policies through a process of modernization within the system. It is essential to increase rarámuri participation in order to promote ancient traditions transmission by oral communication, which can permit the establishment of native language documents for the benefit of future generations. Secondly, rescuing indigenous reality by addressing topics some of the following topics: land use, indigenous philosophy, customs and human rights.

Finally, civil society should not be blind to national minorities, since indifference to others is the worst evil of all evils.

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