EDUCATION FOR ALL

EDUCATION, CULTURE
AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS:
THE CASE OF EDUCATIONAL
REFORM IN BOLIVIA

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Introduction

Today, more than ever before, Latin America is striving to enter the modern world, a goal never fully attained, perhaps because the quest for it was perceived as the exclusive preserve and privilege of elite groups whose intention had always been

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to impose a form of modernity that was no more than an imitation of European or North American models. The refusal to recognize the specific roots, identities and potential of Latin American communities has kept a considerable proportion of the population—namely the many indigenous peoples who are still well represented on our continent—in poverty, ignorance, isolation and despair. The homogenizing tendency characteristic of the processes of modernization involved in building nations on the European model left no room for the multicultural dimension typical of this part of Latin America. The field of education clearly reveals the results of this policy, since schooling has been geared to expressing this desire for Latin-ness, to the detriment of anything that might deviate from the homogenizing paradigm.

Despite this trend towards uniformity, Latin America remains a rich and culturally complex area embracing approximately 50 million indigenous people, nearly 400 different indigenous groups and a multitude of languages, dialects and cultures, both aboriginal and the product of European and African migration.

With the possible exception of Uruguay, no country in Latin America can escape this reality, which has been deliberately hidden from view, especially in relation to the Amerindian question. In many instances and over several centuries, indigenous peoples were reduced to a state of invisibility by a process that, fortunately, has now been partially reversed. While circumstances vary in each country, indigenous people today are not only increasingly visible, but also play an ever more important and active role, even when they are strongly ‘minoritized’, as in Colombia and Chile, or are on the verge of extinction, as in the case of certain indigenous groups in the Caribbean and in Amazonia. When their numbers are greater, as in Bolivia and Guatemala, where indigenous peoples account for over 60% of the population, more serious attention is paid to their demands and to the challenge they represent to governments. Evidence of this can be found not only in the many claims found in the clandestine histories of the indigenous peoples, but also in recent events that have taken their rightful place in the long record of contacts and conflicts—and sometimes, fortunately, of dialogue and agreement—between the leaders of the continent’s indigenous peoples and their opposite numbers in the governments of the States to which they now belong. Among recent events marking the troubled relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, the three most important, in our view, have been the 1990 indigenous uprising in Ecuador demanding more equitable relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples; the 1991 ‘March for the territory and dignity of the indigenous peoples of Oriente’ in Bolivia; and the ongoing struggle in Chiapas (Mexico) for democracy, respect for differences, equality of opportunity and bilingual education. We also wish to draw attention to the fact that, in spite of obstacles, some members of indigenous groups in Latin America have attained positions that until fairly recently were closed to anyone who did not belong to the white or Creole-Mestizo section of the population, such as Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Alfredo Tay, Minister of Education of Guatemala and Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, Vice-President of Bolivia.