Chapter 8

“Don’t You Want Your Child to Be Better than You?”
Enacting Ideologies and Contesting Intercultural Policy in Peru

Laura Alicia Valdiviezo

The Study of a Policy of Contradiction

The implementation of Bilingual Intercultural Education (BIE) in Peru began in the mid-nineties, during a time of social, economic, and political crises exacerbated by a civil war of unprecedented violence that began in 1980 and ended in 2000. It emerged in response not only to this internal upheaval but also to the international Education for All (EFA) agenda that emphasized universal educational access and to a trend toward BIE fomented by bilateral aid agencies, such as Germany’s Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). Peru’s BIE policy focused on providing education to one of the poorest and historically most neglected sectors in the country: indigenous populations. A new constitution in 1993 placed indigenous people, at least nominally, at the center of the government efforts to expand educational access and to democratize the country. The Peruvian government officially adopted BIE to manage cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity and indigenous revitalization, primarily among the country’s six million Quechua speakers. Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere (Valdiviezo 2006), BIE policy was less a national educational response than it was an element in the country’s foreign policy;
therefore, while the BIE policy directed attention to an underserved population, it lacked fundamental information about the local communities to be affected and putatively helped by BIE. In Peru, this lack of knowledge constitutes the policy’s major conceptual contradiction, namely, intercultural without sufficient attention to culture or cultural politics (see also chapter 7). In this chapter, I examine the irony of a national BIE policy created to combat the marginalization of indigenous language, culture, and ethnicity (largely the result of actions by dominant groups in Peru) by developing a too-often uninformed linguistic and cultural educational policy directed solely at indigenous populations. The analysis reveals that while fundamental contradictions in BIE policy channel curriculum and instruction in ways that contribute to the continued exclusion of Quechua culture and language in schools, thereby perpetuating the segregation of indigenous Peruvians, BIE policy has been appropriated by Quechua teachers who use the spaces provided by the policy to creatively address the challenges of diversity. Policies enroll diverse actors, who are forced to reckon with the policy, but teachers and other policy actors appropriate policies in ways that are improvised and often unpredictable (see chapter 1).

This chapter draws on a year-long ethnographic study that I conducted in three rural schools in the southern Peruvian Andes. It illustrates a vertical comparison of the conceptualizations and contradictions of official BIE policy and local teachers’ responses to national policy in indigenous Quechua communities. I devote the first section of the chapter to describing the context of my study and my research design. Particularly, I situate BIE policy within Peru’s complex political and socioeconomic landscape, where historical, local, national, and international forces collide. In the second section, I move into the ethnography and discuss how BIE practitioners appropriate official policy that has aimed at the educational access of marginalized peoples. Specifically, I analyze teachers’ views on the purpose and impact of BIE and their reactions to parental attitudes toward BIE. I conclude by arguing that teachers’ practices and beliefs can constitute a ground-up proposal for policy and educational transformation, an epistemology from below that can challenge the grave inequities afflicting indigenous Peruvian schools and the broader society.

The Shaping of BIE Policy: From Colonial Legacy to EFA

Before the adoption of intercultural policy in Peru, political-economic rhetoric consistently defined the indigenous as those who could not speak, read,