
Indigenous Bilingual Education in Latin America

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Abstract

Indigenous bilingual education in Latin America dates back to at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then the field has evolved significantly, concurrently with the political advancement of Indigenous social movements. The history and contributions of bilingual education are briefly analyzed here, paying particular attention to the challenges, tensions, and paradoxes that arise due to the direct involvement of a growing Indigenous intelligentsia and the adoption by governments of new educational policies regarding Indigenous peoples.

Keywords

Decolonization • Democracy • Equality with dignity • Indigenous • Intercultural bilingual education • Interculturalism

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Introduction

Since the 1970s Latin America has experienced processes of Indigenous resurgence (Meyer and Maldonado 2004). Hence, most countries have undergone constitutional reforms acknowledging multiethnicity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism as well as the right of Indigenous peoples to education in their languages and in certain situations also under community management and control, as is the case in Colombia (CRIC 2004).

Indigenous peoples' movements are highly political and one cannot separate education from their struggles for self-determination. It was mainly the political mobilization of Indigenous organizations themselves that succeeded in leading to educational reforms and intercultural bilingual approaches (e.g., Bolivia and Ecuador). Bilingual education also contributed to generate critical awareness and organization among Indigenous peoples.

Through interculturalism Indigenous organizations, leaders, and committed academics have questioned the structure and functioning of the nation-state that has historically adhered to uniformity and homogeneity. Applied to education this notion challenges the coloniality of power and knowledge, thus moving toward the positive acceptance of Indigenous worldviews and funds of knowledge.

Turning into the twenty-first century, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and nation-states has become even more complex. On the one hand, countries like Bolivia and Ecuador that constitutionally adopted policies of plurinationalism (to radicalize their position before the homogenous nation-state and further challenge the inequitable distribution of power in multination societies), intraculturalism (as complementary to interculturalism), and decolonization now stress Indigenous knowledge, ethics, and values to the detriment of Indigenous languages. Simultaneously, entrepreneurship education in order to prepare youngsters for a market economy and capitalism is also stressed. This is precisely one of the contradictions that illustrates the increasing gap between rhetoric and practice in the fields of interculturalism and bilingual education (López 2009). On the other hand, in countries like Colombia and Peru that are not yet ascribed to plurinationalism, one can now witness the reinforcement of decentralized policies and practices in intercultural bilingual education that grant local authorities certain degrees of autonomy.

Across Latin America the terms intercultural bilingual education, bilingual intercultural education, and ethno-education are used interchangeably, depending on the specific history of each country.

Early Developments

Contemporary Latin America Indigenous bilingual education (IBE) has a long history dating back to the early twentieth century with experiments by teachers working in Indigenous communities in Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador (López 2009).

Starting in the late 1930s in Mexico, the United States-based Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) became a privileged actor, when various governments signed contracts with this institution whose main mission is the translation of the Bible. Additionally, in the Amazonian basin, SIL incorporated Indigenous communities that were then either isolated or had limited contact with the mainstream. For over 50 years, SIL emphasized language development and evangelization, from a perspective of planned cultural change (Larson et al. 1979), which has drawn severe criticism (Hvalkov and Abby 1981). But it must also be acknowledged that the importance given to the development of literacy in Indigenous languages contributed to the speakers' self-esteem (Landaburu 1998).

Initially IBE was conceived as an instrument of assimilation; hence most governments implemented early exit transition strategies. Nonetheless, large-scale projects carried out in the countries with the highest Indigenous presence had an impact on Indigenous communities and schools. Mexico and Peru produced classical publications on IBE (Aguirre-Beltrán 1973; Arguedas 1966; Escobar et al. 1975). The prominence of IBE in these two countries is closely linked to the national policies of State *indigenism*. This period witnessed a major impact of linguistics in IBE, both descriptive and applied.

As Indigenous movements grew stronger in the 1970s and 1980s, a discursive shift took place in most countries away from transitionally oriented programs to adopting maintenance and development schemes (López 2009). A factor influencing this move was the move to critical *indigenism* and to a more grassroots and critical approach.

From its beginnings, IBE drew attention from academic circles. Between 1963 and 1992, 380 books and articles on various aspects of IBE were published in 13 different Latin American countries (Amadío and López 1993). A review article on the state of the art of interculturalism and education, with a heavier emphasis on Mexico, includes 415 publications in the decade 1990–2000 (Bertely and Gonzáles 2004).

IBE has been analyzed from different and complementary perspectives, as a privileged domain of language policy and planning (Brice-Heath 1972; Escobar et al. 1975), the setting in which the predominantly oral Indigenous societies gradually become literate (King 2001; Sichra 2006), a vehicle for combating the long-standing history of discrimination and racism, and a means to introduce interculturalism in multiethnic societies (López 2009). Others have examined IBE within the framework of Indigenous peoples' rights (Bertely 2009), and the 2007 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples dedicates a chapter to analyze education as an individual and a collective right.

Publications also depict different implementation aspects: curriculum design (Dietschy-Scheiterle 1987), material preparation (Chatry-Komarek 1987), language use and alternation in class (Hornberger 1988), and teacher training (Cuenca et al. 2007). Two additional areas prioritized are L2 learning and teaching and the development of a unified writing system in the Indigenous languages, an issue particularly influential in South America.

Indigenous organizations regard IBE as counter-hegemonic, challenging the predominant homogenous goals of education, even when a government agency implements it.

IBE has permanently been under scrutiny. One of the earliest research projects took place in Chiapas, where Indigenous children obtained better scores in Spanish than their peers (Modiano 1974). Comparable results were attained in Puno, Peru, and also in other countries. In rural Mexico, Francis and Hamel (1992) determined that the competencies of bilingual children developed in their L1 transferred to Spanish, facilitating reading, comprehension, and writing skills in their L2. Similarly, in Peru, López and Jung (2003) found that Aymara-speaking children in IBE produced written texts in Spanish – their L2 – of higher grammatical and rhetorical complexity than those they could produce orally in this same language.

Since the 1990s the geography of IBE has grown significantly since most educational reforms included it as the approach to respond to the expectations of Indigenous populations. Whereas before the implementation of IBE, projects were generally restricted to the countries with more Indigenous presence, by 2014 these programs were being implemented in almost every country. In some cases, for example, Bolivia, an analysis of the evolution of IBE and its upscaling made specialists conclude that governments had changed their perspective moving from focalized projects to the inscription of IBE in national policies (Albó and Anaya 2003). However, IBE remains generally restricted to the formal primary education of children in rural areas and under a compensatory approach.

Major Contributions

The studies reviewed and our own involvement in research and in the practical implementation of IBE show that the adoption of maintenance and development ideologies coincided with an emerging understanding of the role of culture in education. Confronted with the paradox that Indigenous languages were being used as media of Western knowledge transmission, it was considered that much more than bilingual education was needed. Gradually IBE began paying more attention to Indigenous values, knowledge, and practices. It must also be acknowledged that most of the educational reforms of the 1990s included intercultural education for all, influenced by the demands of education for all, establishing links between education and the strengthening of democracy. This has been one of the most pressing demands from Indigenous leaders who claim that to combat cultural homogeneity society at large should become intercultural.

Most recent Indigenous proposals also point in the direction of a two-way IBE (CNEM 2004; CONAMAQ et al. 2004) now under the spirit of decolonization and plurinationalism. These ideals also challenge universities due to their increasing number of Indigenous students. Additionally, Indigenous leaders and intellectuals established autonomous Indigenous universities in Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua in order to accompany their political projects. The Bolivian, Mexican, and

Peruvian governments founded official intercultural universities in order to include Indigenous students and content.

Another major outcome of IBE is related to the increasing attention paid to Indigenous language development. Their introduction to schools meant their previous written development and even their lexical elaboration, tasks which became even more demanding when IBE moved into the upper levels of primary school. IBE adopted the notion of *normalization* taken from the Catalanian and Basque sociolinguistic tradition, and linguists and teachers became involved in language elaboration processes and in the creation of unified writing systems in line with linguistic standardization. Producing textbooks in otherwise oral languages also implied training teachers and community educators who spoke these languages but had not written them.

In line with the emphasis given to language development, initially the preparation of teachers favored training in some aspects of descriptive linguistics, usually to the detriment of a sound understanding of the roles, culture, and pedagogy play in IBE. This orientation has been revised since attention is now given to a more comprehensive understanding of IBE as alternative to hegemonic education. IBE now experiences a process of radicalization at discursive level resulting from the adoption of decolonizing ideologies which pay heavier emphasis to politics and to culture than to language. This reconceptualization in progress is a by-product of the involvement of Indigenous intellectuals and organizations in the field.

It is now generally accepted that in-service teacher training is insufficient and that greater attention ought to be paid to ongoing teachers' professional development. As of the 1990s, more IBE teacher education programs have been established, gradually resulting in curriculum redefinition with more consideration paid to Indigenous knowledge systems and histories.

The benefits of L1 development referred to above do not seem to be restricted to greater L2 proficiency. Findings from different countries provide evidence related to Indigenous bilingual children's overall academic achievement, active participation in learning, development of a positive self-image, self-esteem and respect, a greater capacity for adaptation, and a more tolerant attitude in cases of frustration. It is promising to discover that bilingual children take advantage of, and apply, the linguistic knowledge and experiences previously acquired, in spite of the short span of time devoted to systematic L1 development (3–4 years). With greater investment put into L1 development, one could expect even better results.

Nonetheless, results such as these are challenged by social and economic processes that break away with the notion that being Indigenous implies being monolingual and rural. Nowadays in most countries, the majority of Indigenous populations live in urban settings. Hence, modern ways of life and the European hegemonic language exert heavier influence than ever in Indigenous rural settings. These transformations challenge the theory and practice of IBE: on the one hand, clear-cut definitions of L1 and L2 become increasingly blurred with the prevalence of simultaneous bilingualism, the hegemonic European language is increasingly becoming the preferred language in Indigenous communication, and hence traditional language teaching approaches and methodologies need to be revised.

Two other findings in favor of the inclusion and use of children's languages in education are increased and better quality participation from parents and communities, as well as significant improvement in terms of internal efficiency indicators such as school attendance, retention, and less grade repetition. It is interesting to note that when the power structures are modified and some Indigenous leaders assume important national roles as in Bolivia, the need for grassroots participation is underestimated and the State takes over the Indigenous representation.

If in the 1980s researchers paid attention solely to the ways languages were taught and used in classrooms, more recently the emphasis has shifted to the ways Indigenous people learn and transmit knowledge in different settings. Indigenous ways of learning pay equal attention to the affective and cognitive domains, since you also seem to "learn with the heart" (Castillo 2005). Attention is also paid to the ways languages mediate the primary socialization process in bilingual communities in Mesoamerica and the Andes (Ramos 2014; García 2005). Thus curriculum design is becoming a place of struggle and negotiation between Indigenous peoples and the State and learning is seen as cultural practice. Additionally, the ethnography of formal schooling demonstrates how teachers' beliefs and practices create spaces for the contestation and innovation of IBE policies toward culture and language revitalization (Valdiviezo 2014). Ethnographies further show that different understandings of interculturalism by teachers, parents, and students influence educational practices and generate innumerable contradictions as to how one learns (Osuna 2012).

Work in Progress

The increasing role Indigenous organizations and intellectuals have assumed has brought about new analysis and research issues. Four of them relate to the recuperation of Indigenous views and voices, to newer and greater demands on teacher education and on the preparation of qualified human resources in general, as well as to the challenges of IBE in urban settings and of extending bilingual education to non-vernacular speakers.

Opposed to traditional mainstream education that denies the existence of another language and culture in the classroom, IBE is now recognized as part of the Indigenous patrimony rescuing their values and relocating their languages and cultures, assigning them – at least – in the school domain the same status the hegemonic languages and cultures enjoy. Thus, IBE is understood from a rights approach, including both the Universal Human Rights of 1948 and the Indigenous Peoples Rights of 2007. This paradigm shift places vast demands on teachers professionally trained under the ideals of monolingualism and monoculturalism. Thus, teacher education is moving beyond the technicalities of teaching, in order to professionally prepare them to assume a personal and collective commitment to struggle against racism and discrimination and to accompany Indigenous peoples' struggles. This new focus is aligned with Indigenous ideals of transforming Latin American countries into multination entities. In Bolivia and Guatemala, bilingual teacher professional development has become an issue of national concern, while in

Argentina and Chile, regional proposals resort to the inclusion of Indigenous community educators in classrooms working in tandem with professional monolingual teachers (Hirsch and Serrudo 2013). In Brazil, the reconstruction of local histories is a medium for renewed Indigenous teacher training (Carvalho et al. 2001), while in Colombia emphasis is given to Indigenous ethnicity in order to guarantee student-teacher alignment with Indigenous pedagogical and political projects (Castillo et al. 2008).

In this context, the work regarding Indigenous views is being undertaken both within academic spheres and by some Indigenous organizations themselves. In at least Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, and Mexico, grassroots organizations are involved in the design and implementation of alternative educational programs in which local knowledge and histories deserve specific attention. In Bolivia and Guatemala, this is an outcome of the concern of Indigenous educational councils (CNEM 2004; CONAMAQ et al. 2004). In Colombia and Chiapas, Mexico, the interest on the development of alternative IBE models is a side effect of a profound change in educational management: in Colombia, as a result of the constitutional reform of 1991, Indigenous peoples have the right to design and implement their own models under central government financing (CRIC 2004), while in Chiapas, a new regime of self-determined-autonomous-local governments motivates communities to organize their own education (Baronnet 2013).

Recuperating Indigenous voices and views receives increasing attention from universities and research centers. Such is the case of PROEIB Andes – the Program of Professional Development in Intercultural Bilingual Education for the Andean countries – through its MA program that receives students from seven different countries, including Mexico. Research contributes to Indigenous curriculum design and implementation attending equally to alternative models of learning and education, broader social dimensions of the Indigenous culture, and the sociolinguistics of Indigenous communities (cf. www.proeibandes.org). Those are the cases of a ceramics and textile project for the Awajun of Peru and the Amuzgo of Mexico (Taish 2001; Santiago 2011), an art project for the Mapuche of Chile (Cartes 2001), primary socialization in families working in potato crops in Bolivia (Zambrana 2008) and in corn plantations in Mexico (Argüelles 2010), or regarding the tensions that arise among the Guambiano of Colombia as a result of the introduction of writing (Almendra 2005), or also in connection to the curriculum incorporation of hunting-related knowledge of the Yuracare of Bolivia (Sánchez 2005).

The Indigenous demand for increased inclusion of their knowledge and values has cast doubt on the ontology of school and academic knowledge in general (Stobart and Howard 2002; Trapnell 2008). Indigenous leaders and organizations are now struggling for exercising control over curriculum design taking advantage of the fissures opened by the ministries of education themselves when they opened up legal provision for curriculum diversification (CNEM 2004; Aikman 2003). Nonetheless, new official curricula leave little room for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and practices. Moreover, when regional or local curricula exist, as in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala, national governments practically ignore them.

Indigenous demands constantly challenge top-down educational policies and push for bottom-up ones. In the context of political decentralization, the classical leadership in IBE that Mexico and Peru once had was displaced in the 1990s into other countries where IBE was the result of popular demand and Indigenous struggle (e.g., Bolivia and Ecuador). However, more recently, and also due to the paradoxes these two countries are experiencing, further displacements have moved leadership in IBE mostly to the local level onto Indigenous organizations, NGOs, and regional governments, as in the cases of Peru (Zavala 2014) and Colombia.

Bottom-up approaches are also implemented in countries and regions where IBE is a new concern. In Argentina provincial governments have taken it upon themselves to implement IBE policies (Hirsch and Serrudo 2013), while in Chile the Mapuches are struggling to have their language recognized and fully included in the educational system (Loncón 2015).

The concern on education for all and the Indigenous demand for two-way bilingual education have brought up IBE initiatives in urban settings, such as those of Cuzco, Peru (www.pukllasunchis.org), where Indigenous and non-Indigenous pupils study together from preschool to high school in a private school. Comparable experiences with Spanish-speaking pupils are being carried out in Guatemala, Mexico, and Quito where at least the teaching of an Indigenous language has been included in the curriculum.

Together with these four new concerns, there is an old issue that still attracts the attention of governments and academia: learning and teaching Spanish as a L2 (Rockwell and Pellicer 2003; Hamel 2004). More work is needed in this area, particularly due to pressure from parents regarding their children's needs to master Spanish in order to have better chances in life. Similarly, the L2 methodological issue acquires greater importance due to the unexpected need to teach Indigenous languages to mainstream students. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, L1 and L2 approaches and methodologies need to be seriously revised in view of the profound sociolinguistic changes the Amerindian world experiences.

Problems and Difficulties

In Latin America research cannot be drastically detached from IBE implementation. Most generally researchers are also IBE activists and hence involved in various stages of implementation. In addition it must also be considered that funds available exclusively for research are practically nonexistent, perhaps with the exception of certain Brazilian and Mexican institutions.

When IBE became the most suitable approach for Indigenous students, monolingualism was relatively high and most of this population inhabited rural areas that were either isolated or difficult to reach. This scenario has dramatically changed: roads, migration, telecommunications, economic globalization, consumerism and capitalism, and political and legal transformations have, on the one hand, modified the historical *invisibility* of Indigenous peoples and the physical and mental distance that separated Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings and people; but, on

the other hand, Indigenous survival has been seriously affected, particularly when mining and other extractive industries are part of national policies. Notwithstanding, IBE remains trapped in a perspective of Indigenous monolingualism.

Linguistic communities that lost active use of the Indigenous language are also demanding attention in the context of ongoing identity politics or ethnogenesis. Hence, it has become common for Indigenous leaders to claim that “The school should return to us the language it deprived us of” (López 2015). These claims do not only challenge present understandings of IBE but also existing institutional and communal capacities since Indigenous communities overemphasize the role the school should play in linguistic revitalization while underestimating intergenerational transmission.

As mentioned, Indigenous resurgence challenges the ontology of school knowledge, and now the field is confronted with increasing demands regarding the sense and meaning of national school curricula, within the wider context of decolonization. Such is the case, for example, of Bolivia (Gustafson 2014) and also Nicaragua (McLean 2008). In other countries concessions have been made so as to incorporate Indigenous values, knowledge, and practices at least within the context of IBE for Indigenous students, but contradictions may well arise in the classroom due to the divergence of the underlying worldviews.

Recently and due to ongoing internal migration, more than often schools and classrooms are becoming multiethnic (Czarny and Martínez 2013), and hence Spanish becomes the preferred language of the classroom, since it is difficult for teachers to accommodate to multilingualism.

Another problem is the insufficiency of adequately trained human resources – bilingual teachers and professionals – for the type of education management required. This need is even greater when IBE is under the responsibility of Indigenous community educators.

For at least a decade, most countries have implemented institutional and pedagogical reforms in teacher training along the lines of IBE. Nonetheless, the results appear to be still minimal: teachers do not show the professional and political strength needed to convince parents and communities of the advantages of IBE. Similarly, they cannot break away from rote learning and blackboard copying and dictation, which are persistent features of pedagogy in many places of Latin America and North America, particularly in connection to Indigenous language teaching (King 2001). This tendency becomes stronger when the Indigenous languages are taught as a L2 (Sichra 2006). The usual adherence to “the norm” and the priority given to the written word make the school language gradually diverge from the language of the home, the elders, and the community. This type of language pedagogy contradicts the liberating spirit inherent in IBE and the need to encourage and listen to the student’s own voice in the Bakhtinian sense.

In turn, decentralized horizontal and participatory educational management of IBE requires from administrators and decision-makers more openness toward the community and to local and regional organizations, structures, and knowledge. Committed human resources are needed at all levels within ministries of education and Indigenous organizations. Since traditionally schools imposed upon Indigenous community their own ways and logics of management, reflecting the perspectives of

the hegemonic society, the active participation of parents and community leaders in decision-making regarding institutional and pedagogical management generates conflicts and feelings of insecurity in both parties. Underlying these problems is the clash between hegemonic and subaltern societal sectors which adhere either to the mainstream culture or to the Indigenous one (Sichra 2002). Whether of Indigenous origin or not teachers, unless politically committed and aligned with the interests of the Indigenous peoples, most generally represent the interests of the hegemonic sectors, since they are in fact public officers and are regarded as such by everybody. In this role, teachers gradually experience a loss of agency and their displacement of their sense of purpose (López 2009). Hence, decolonization encounters here a serious impediment.

Future Directions

Many of these challenges place the discussion regarding the future of IBE in a scenario that is both political and epistemological. Both dimensions seem to intertwine. Indigenous claims are more concerned with the need to achieve equality with dignity and to continue being Indigenous and are no longer preoccupied only with issues of school access and coverage. This occurs within a broader framework of a discursive claim for Life for the Common Good. However, it remains to be seen what place Indigenous languages play in this new setting. Paradoxically, the politics and policies of interculturalism for all seem to be going to the detriment of IBE.

In this context, there is a series of open-ended questions that need further analysis. It is no longer possible to speak of a single model of IBE, as governments have historically done. The social transformations alluded to here force us in the direction of a multifactorial IBE or of diverse EIBs, in order to politically and epistemologically respond to diversity at large, in terms of ethics, knowledge, methodologies, didactics, and practices.

This relocated version of Latin American IBE leads us into the following fields of enquiry:

- (a) The issues of equality with dignity or equality within diversity in the design and implementation of educational models for Indigenous students in rural and urban settings, vis-à-vis the global notion of educational quality and the risks of uniformity and standardization.
- (b) The relationship between Indigenous primary socialization and formal preschool education, since more than often Indigenous children are being institutionalized at a very early age.
- (c) Indigenous primary schooling and the need to envisage diversified curricula depending on the specific urban and rural sociolinguistic settings.
- (d) The implementation of certain IBE strategies in high school, vis-à-vis the need to build bridges between primary schooling, high school, and the tertiary level.
- (e) Indigenous youths and their attention by both formal and nonformal education.
- (f) The issue of Indigenous identities and intercultural citizenship.

It remains to be seen whether the notion of decolonization that in fact was in the original spirit of IBE will contribute to empower the education of Indigenous peoples and also to achieve the ideal of unity within diversity. Nowadays, there seem to be two current contradictory paths: (a) the adherence to decolonization without resorting to a full IBE and stressing only the symbolic function of Indigenous languages and (b) the use of this notion to radicalize diverse IBE strategies and/or Indigenous educations, resorting to concurrent active use of the Indigenous languages in classroom and schools. Within this complexity, the notion of decolonization needs further elaboration and operationalization in order to prepare the adequate human resources needed for IBE implementation.

Language revitalization is an area to be addressed and that needs to be approached as a cooperative effort under increasing community control. IBE is then faced with a threefold challenge: (a) revisiting the historical definitions of L1 and L2; (b) redefining language teaching approaches and methodologies since language teaching follows models proper of languages of international communication and of industrialized societies; and (c) training the professionals needed in contexts of multilingualism, language erosion, and active political Indigenous participation (López 2015).

Similarly, and since in a number of countries, like Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru, language rights have been legally acknowledged, IBE has to look beyond the school. Indigenous homes and communities need to be regarded as key agents of language maintenance and revitalization at a moment of increased awareness regarding language endangerment and dramatic loss of biological diversity.

The recognition of the value of Indigenous cultures and languages reflects the historical acceptance by States and societies of the Indigenous ancestry and patrimony. By regarding Indigenous populations as an integral part of the State and promoting their active social and political participation, advances are being made against sociopolitical exclusion, thereby triggering an ideological relocation of linguistic and cultural diversity that has an impact on every citizen of a multiethnic society. This shift implies a tremendous challenge for the mainstream, particularly for those in decision-making. It becomes mandatory to abandon once and for all the compensatory understanding of IBE, within the context of democratic inclusiveness, and to regard IBE as an approach for better educational quality for all. To achieve these goals, the notion of educational quality and the strategies most generally attached to it – national homogenous curriculum, educational standards, and standardized testing – also need to be situated and thus interculturalized. Indeed, one cannot envisage a pedagogy aligned with diversity with tools conceived of for a homogenous monolingual and monocultural world.

Cross-References

- [Bilingual Education for Indigenous Peoples in Mexico](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Luis Enrique López: [Decolonization and Bilingual/Intercultural Education](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
- Marleen Haboud: [Language Policy and Education in the Andes](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
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