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Language, culture and identity in the transition to primary school: challenges to indigenous children's rights to education in Peru

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Abstract

This paper analyses a 'critical moment' in the educational trajectories of young indigenous children in Peru: the transition to primary school. It addresses the inequalities in educational services that affect indigenous children, before looking at the micro-level processes that take place in school settings, through a focus on two selected case studies from the Young Lives study of childhood poverty. Using longitudinal information collected in two consecutive years, the case studies show how the children's language and culture are excluded from school premises and their very identity as children and indigenous people is disregarded, negatively affecting their educational performance.

Keywords: indigenous education, educational policy, indigenous children, educational inequalities.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, several authors have highlighted the importance the transition to primary school has for the quality of children's school experience in later years (Dunlop and Fabian, 2002; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Johansson, 2002; Margetts, 2000; Woodhead and Moss, 2007). Nevertheless, and despite the wealth of research on the issue in high-income countries, research in the developing world and among specific groups of children are scarce. This paper addresses one such group: indigenous Quechua children of the Andes in Peru, South America, as they experience the process of transition from preschool to primary school.

The indigenous children of Peru were traditionally excluded from schooling until the mid-twentieth century and only in recent decades has their access to school become widespread. Quechua people are the largest indigenous group in Peru. Almost all indigenous Quechua children attend primary

school, but only about a third of them go to preschool.¹ Little attention has been directed towards studying how indigenous children experience their first contact with school (with the notable exception of Alvarado and Suarez, 2009 in Colombia). Since literature stresses that the beginning of primary school is crucial to educational success, then this transition should be better understood in the case of indigenous children, who will enter a new social and cultural space – especially since, despite the impressive enrolment figures, most educational indicators show that severe inequalities are in place in relation to indigenous children’s schooling.

Indeed, as will be shown below, it is among indigenous children that the highest rates of repetition, drop-out and over-age are found, as well as the lowest educational outcomes. Several issues have been considered to explain this situation, such as the associations between ethnicity and poverty, rurality and low maternal education, as well as the low quality of inputs offered in schools attended by indigenous children (Cueto et al, 2010). This paper, however, argues that the school experience itself should be examined to understand better the lower educational results among indigenous children, and to assess the extent to which their right to education is met. This in turn may enrich our definition of what ‘good quality’ education means and help us refine our ways of measuring it beyond traditional indicators.

The paper first reviews statistical information to show the educational inequalities that affect indigenous children in Peru, before moving on to present findings from Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty.² As part of the Young Lives study, qualitative, in-depth and longitudinal case studies were carried out between 2007 and 2008. Case studies comprised 28 young children, selected randomly from a broader sample of 2,000 children of the same age. This article focuses on two of the case study children, both indigenous, as they went from preschool to primary school, analysing their views of their school experience and putting together various types of information (direct observations, interviews with teachers and parents) to complement it. I argue that young indigenous children’s voices can help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current educational policies and practices that help them to realize (or prevent them from realizing) their rights to education, identity and participation, as recognized by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2. Indigenous children’s schooling: increasing enrolment but persistent inequalities

¹ The situation is rather different for indigenous groups in the Amazon, which show lower enrolment rates than the national average, in comparison with non-indigenous groups and also in comparison with indigenous Andean groups.

² See www.younglives.org.uk

According to the latest ‘State of indigenous children in Peru’ published by UNICEF (2010), a much higher proportion of indigenous children live in poverty or extreme poverty than do Spanish-speaking children: in 2009, 78 per cent of indigenous children lived in poverty, almost double the proportion of children who have Spanish as their mother tongue, among whom the poverty rate is 40 per cent.³ The gap in terms of extreme poverty is even wider, since only 12 per cent of non-indigenous children lived in extreme poverty in comparison with 45 per cent of indigenous children.⁴ For indigenous children, the social context is therefore marked by inequalities from the start.

In such a context, it is not surprising that school enrolment rates show gaps that favour non-indigenous, Spanish-speaking children over indigenous children. This is especially true for younger children. In the case of Quechua people, who are the largest indigenous group in Peru, just over a third (34 per cent) of Quechua children aged 3 to 5 years old attended a preschool in 2007, while half the children of that age whose mother tongue was Spanish (52 per cent) attended one (UNICEF, 2010).⁵

When it is time to attend the first grade of primary education, at the age of 6, the percentage dramatically increases to 80 per cent for Quechua children, but this is still lower than the rate for Spanish-speaking children of that age (91.6 per cent) (UNICEF, 2010). However, Quechua children show overall similar enrolment rates (93 per cent) to the national average (95 per cent) for the age group from 6 to 11 years old, which applies mostly from 7 years old onwards. This situation, very similar for Aymara children, the other major group of indigenous people in the Andes, is nonetheless different for many other indigenous peoples in the Amazon, who show much lower enrolment rates at all ages (see also Vasquez et al., 2009).

Despite the relatively high rates of enrolment in primary education for Peruvian children in general, including Quechua children, it must be noted that the expansion of access to education was achieved with low investment. Thus for example, although enrolment rates and public expenditure on education showed a similar growth curve between 1905 and 1966 (see Contreras, 1996), from 1970, when enrolment increased even more, expenditure per student started to decrease (see

³ Indigenous children are defined in this report and others cited in this section by the language they acquired first.

⁴ Calculations based on data from the National Household Survey (ENAHO) 2009.

⁵ All figures on school enrolment are based on the last National Census (2007).

Saavedra and Suarez, 2002), negatively affecting educational quality and opportunities for children from poor families in particular (Wu et al., 2001).

This is reflected for example in the schools and the material resources they have, which are poorer in the case of indigenous groups. Indeed, a wide set of studies has documented the makeshift conditions in schools attended by indigenous children, especially in rural areas, uncovering issues of inadequate infrastructure and furniture; and lack of educational materials, equipment and resources (Ames, 2005; Bello and Villarán, 2004; Montero et al., 2001). Hernandez Zavala et al. (2006) found that poor classroom conditions decreased test scores, showing the negative effects that poorly resourced schools may have on students' learning.

In that sense, poorer schools seem to produce poorer results, as reflected in various educational indicators. Thus for example, Cueto et al. (2010), using the School Census 2007 (which refers to the 2006 school year), show that primary and secondary schools with a predominantly indigenous intake (i.e. over 50 per cent) have lower rates of promotion to the next grade (78.1 per cent vs. the national average of 87.6 per cent) and higher rates of grade repetition (13.4 per cent vs. the national average of 7.1 per cent) and drop-out (8.5 per cent vs. the national average of 5.3 per cent). Analysing Young Lives data, they also found more indigenous children over-age (above the usual age for their grade) at age 8 (29.3 per cent in contrast with 13.8 per cent among non indigenous children). Moreover, the gap tended to increase as children got older, and thus by age 12, 61 per cent of the indigenous children were one year or more over-age in contrast with 34.9 per cent of the Spanish-speaking children in the sample.⁶

Similarly, UNICEF (2010), using the National Census 2007, provides disaggregated information for each ethnic group and also indicates lower rates of promotion at primary schools attended by a majority of Quechua children (87.7 per cent in contrast with 92.2 per cent in schools attended by a majority of Spanish-speaking children), as well as higher rates of drop-out at all levels in those schools. Thus for example, 7.7 per cent of Quechua children abandon primary school in contrast with 5.4 per cent of Spanish-speaking children, and this proportion is higher in secondary school, where 10 per cent of Quechua children drop out in contrast with 6.2 per cent of Spanish-speaking children. Conclusion rates are also lower for Quechua children: only 72.1 per cent of children aged 13 to 15 years old finished primary school, while 86.9 per cent of Spanish-speaking children of this age did so. The UNICEF report also analyses over-age rates for different indigenous groups, which are higher, in all cases but one (Aymara children), than those for Spanish-speaking children, and

⁶ Indigenous children in the Young Lives sample are mostly Andean (Quechua and Aymara) with a small number of Ashaninkas.

increase with age. Thus, in the case of Quechua children, only 35.1 per cent of them have finished secondary education at age 18, while this figure is 67.1 per cent for Spanish speakers of the same age. Nevertheless, the gap is even higher for indigenous groups of the Amazon.

Educational assessments also show low achievement among indigenous children: The National Student Examinations in Native Languages 2008 carried out in 403 Quechua bilingual schools among grade 4 students (primary level) show very low levels of achievement: only 6 per cent of Quechua children performed at the expected level for their grade in reading comprehension in their first language/mother tongue and 19.2 per cent performed at the expected level in reading comprehension in their second language/Spanish, while a significant proportion performed below the basic level (62 per cent in the former test and 38 per cent in the latter) (Ministerio de Educación, 2009).

There is also evidence of wide disparities in the achievement of indigenous children in comparison with non-indigenous ones: thus for example, the National Examination of 2001 showed significant differences between students in bilingual rural schools and non-bilingual rural schools (Ministerio de Educación, 2004).⁷ While Ministry of Education results are usually presented in terms of the type of schools evaluated, Cueto et al. (2010), using data from the 2001 and 2004 National Examinations, compared individual students and found that in both examinations ‘children with Spanish as their mother tongue scored above the mean and children with an indigenous mother tongue scored below the mean’ (Cueto et al., 2010:15). Similarly, in a comparative study conducted in Peru, Mexico and Guatemala, Hernandez-Zapata et al. (2006) found in all three countries that indigenous students performed significantly worse overall than non-indigenous students. In Peru, the data analysed was from the UNESCO test of 1997. Kudó (2004), analysing the same data, arrives at the same conclusion.

Insufficient teacher training and low quality professional qualifications are other issues affecting schools attended mostly by indigenous children negatively (Hernández-Zavala, 2006; Zúñiga, 2008). Moreover, although Peruvian law acknowledges the right of indigenous children to be educated in their own language, this only happens in practice at primary schools and mostly in rural areas, while in preschool and secondary school teaching is almost always in Spanish, with few, mostly pilot, programmes being implemented in recent years. Even in primary schools, only 37 per cent of indigenous children in 2008 attended a school considered part of an Intercultural Bilingual Education program (EIB in Spanish), according to the School Census 2008 (UNICEF, 2010).

⁷ The Ministry of Education’s report on National Examination of 2004 did not offer information on bilingual schools or indigenous children, but compared rural and urban schools (see Ministerio de Educación, 2005).

Nevertheless, even those schools that claim to be part of EIB do not necessarily use bilingual pedagogical approaches for several reasons, among them the lack of teachers trained in bilingual education, or even teachers who speak the same language as the students. Therefore the lack of access to truly bilingual education programmes may be underestimated.

In summary, the Peruvian educational system shows evidence of severe inequalities, which affect indigenous children negatively, especially in rural areas, as these children fare worse in terms of entrance to and progression through the system, the material conditions in which they study, and the results of their learning as measured by standardized tests and as reflected in promotion rates.

Inequalities are indeed present before and beyond school: indigenous children in Peru face social and economic disadvantages of various forms that undoubtedly affect their learning and are evidence of unequal social structures. This situation needs to be acknowledged to allow for integrated interventions that address different aspects of indigenous people's development and well-being (health, nutrition, income, education, land rights, etc.). Although the education system cannot solve all the issues alone, it clearly has a role in helping indigenous children to overcome these disadvantages. However, instead of doing that it seems that school is deepening these disadvantages, by limiting the chances for indigenous children to get an education of good quality, in their own language and taking account of their own culture and knowledge.

This last issue is particularly important for this paper, as it is one of the most salient topics emerging from the case studies I will examine below. Since many of the studies cited above highlight the importance of researching the social and pedagogical relations in the classroom, while at the same time recognizing that these studies are scarce, this paper aims to contribute to this aspect of the literature. Through the detailed case studies of indigenous children's first experiences at school that are presented next, the paper will examine the complexities of culture, language and identity at school that indigenous children have to face, in order to attempt to understand their 'failure' in the school system and to what extent the school system is failing them too.

3. Indigenous children's experiences of the transition to primary school

I argued earlier that the transition to primary school is a 'critical moment' (Thomson et al. 2002) on which children may base their later relationship to school, and therein lies the importance of studying such a moment. The concept of transition may be interpreted in different ways though, and thus this study aligns itself with one generic definition of transition, which refers to 'key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course' (Vogler et al.,

2008). In the field of early education, Dunlop and Fabian (2002: 3) provide a more focused definition: ‘The word “transition” is referred to as the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another. For example, when a child moves from home to preschool, or from preschool to school.’ This is indeed the type of process observed in this study. However, the research approach was also informed by the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which prompts us to consider not only the setting of the school, but also the interconnected set of contexts or microsystems in which the child and school are located. The methodology used is described next.

3.1. Research participants and methodology

The children participating in this research are part of a larger sample followed by Young Lives, a 15-year longitudinal study of childhood poverty, conducted in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam. Two cohorts of children are being studied in detail in each country, comprising 2,000 children born in 2000–1 (the ‘Younger Cohort’) and 1,000 children born in 1994–5 (the ‘Older Cohort’). Information about the whole sample is collected every three to four years through surveys. A sub-sample of about 50 children was selected for qualitative, in-depth case studies in each country, and they came from four different regions. This paper is based on the 28 case studies of the younger children in Peru, 12 of them reported as indigenous.⁸ The children were visited in 2007, when most of them were at preschool, and one year later, in 2008, when they were attending the first grade of primary school. For this paper I focus on two case studies from a Quechua rural community, as the indigenous population is mostly located in rural areas, especially in the Andes, although their presence in urban areas increases every year.

The case studies come from a community Young Lives calls *Andahuaylas* after the province it belongs to,⁹ within the region of Apurimac, one of the poorest in Peru and seriously affected by the internal armed conflict in the country between 1980 and 1992. Andahuaylas is a farming community located at between 3,000 and 3,500 metres in altitude, where people grow mostly potatoes and corn and women look after the cattle. Houses are scattered among the hills, built to be close to the land people cultivate. There are about 2,000 inhabitants grouped into 335 households.

⁸ For this study a child is considered indigenous either if a) he/she has an indigenous language as his/her first language; or b) his/her mother has an indigenous language as their first language. First language is not the only indicator of ethnicity but it is the most used in Peruvian national statistics.

⁹ All names (of communities and people) have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

The study used different methods of data collection, considering the views of children, parents and teachers, in order to facilitate a multiple perspective approach and gain a better understanding of children's experiences (Griebel and Niesel, 2002). Children's own views and perceptions on the transition to primary school were gathered through group-based participatory methods and individual interviews combining drawing and play, as well as direct observations of children inside and outside school. Data from parents and teachers were collected through individual interviews. These different types of information coming from multiple methods created a 'mosaic' (Clark and Moss, 2001; Crivello et al., 2009), that allowed for a richer understanding of children's biographies and educational experiences.

The two case studies were selected as they offer an in-depth look at the kind of experiences young indigenous children face when starting school. Their experiences were similar to other children of the same age studied in the same community. I selected a boy and a girl of the same age to account for gender differences. Both children were in the same class, both in preschool and at primary school.

In both the preschool and the primary school, the infrastructure was in good condition, the furniture was suited to the age and size of children, and the classrooms had an attractive layout, and had modest but colourful resources and displays that the children appreciated. The first-grade classroom studied was in fact located in the newest wing of the school, constructed with wooden floors, cement walls and good ceiling. According to the Ministry of Education's schools database, there were 45 children in first grade in 2008. They were split into two classes, and the class studied had 21 students (14 boys and 7 girls) during the observation period. Each classroom at the school contained children in one grade and had one teacher.

Teachers (female in preschool, male in first grade) had standard professional qualifications (five years training at a teachers' college). All the teachers in the school commute every day from the nearby city, about 45 minutes from the village. They speak Quechua, as do most people in the region, although they would not classify themselves as indigenous but as *mestizo* (mixed) people. The rest of the paper will present the case studies of Ana and Felipe, and discuss the implications they have for ensuring quality education for indigenous children.

3.2. Ana

Ana was five years old when we visited her for the first time in 2007. She was the second of three daughters and lived with both parents. She learned Quechua as her first language and used it mostly

in all the research activities, as she spoke little Spanish. Despite her young age, Ana had gone through three different education programmes. First, she attended the *Wawa Wasi* from the age of six months to four years old. The *Wawa Wasi* ('House of babies' in Quechua) is a public, community-based daycare programme for young children, run by the Ministry of Women and Social Development. A woman from the community looks after up to eight children during weekdays, in her own home, but in an environment that has been deemed adequate for this. Women in charge of *Wawa Wasi* are trained and supervised and are given resources to provide meals for the children during the day (Cueto et al., 2009). The *Wawa Wasi* was a very popular programme among the caregivers of our case study children in Ana's village, and all the Younger Cohort sample children there attended it. During our group interviews with them, caregivers reported it as the best service available for children in the village.

Then, when she turned four, Ana attended a formal pre-school centre aimed at children aged three to five years old, and run by the Ministry of Education. However, in contrast with their positive opinion of the *Wawa Wasi*, the pre-school service was severely criticized by caregivers. Ana's mother in particular was concerned with language use at preschool. As we have noted in section 2, there is no EIB for preschool, and thus most teaching is in Spanish, in contrast with *Wawa Wasi*, where communication is in children's mother tongue, as the person in charge belongs to the same community. During a group interview, Ana's mother, along with another woman, complained about preschool and the language issue features strongly in her complaint. The interview report states:

Both mothers say children don't learn anything at preschool, that they only go to play and that the teachers don't teach well, and are frequently absent. They also say children are asked to learn in Spanish, and children are capable of learning but can only express themselves fully in Quechua'.

These mothers seem acutely aware that their young children cannot communicate all they know in a language they are just starting to learn at the age of four or five, and worry about this. Although the preschool teachers have higher professional qualifications than the women at *Wawa Wasi*, they are perceived as poor-quality teachers, and the issue of language and culture may not be minor in this perception. A recent EIB pilot programme at preschool among Ashaninka people (an indigenous group in the Amazon) showed that children attending non-formal preschools in the charge of local, indigenous women with no professional qualifications but appropriate cultural and language knowledge, plus training, outperformed children attending formal preschools with professional

teachers using Spanish as a medium of instruction.¹⁰ These results may prove Ana's mother right for her concern about the limited use of Quechua for the education of this age group.

Finally, in 2008, at the age of six, Ana started first grade at primary school. Although primary education should be bilingual in this village, because over 90 per cent of children have Quechua as their mother tongue, this is not the case in Ana's school, where Spanish is the official medium of instruction. Nevertheless, the teachers have to speak in Quechua if they want their children to understand, although they say they intend to reduce their use of Quechua more and more as children grow up. However, Ana's mother was not so concerned with language at primary school, and it seems that for her 'true' learning will happen there:

Ana's mother: [In first grade] she is going to study. She is going to change, to speak words – she is going to learn. In school she is going to learn. She will say, "I have homework."

Interviewer: Doesn't this happen in preschool?

Ana's mother: No, it isn't like that. She doesn't know anything. My other daughter went for two years for nothing.

The following year her views did not change when her daughter did not perform well at the beginning of first grade. She attributed this to the lack of preparation she received at preschool, and said, '*she did not do anything at preschool, ... only doodles*'. Interestingly, she did not raise the language issue as she had the year before. But this is not uncommon. Several studies have pointed out that primary education is strongly associated with the learning of Spanish language and literacy, knowledge which is important for self-preservation in a literate, Spanish-speaking society, and for progressing in life, for 'becoming someone' (Ames, 2002; Crivello, 2009; Montoya, 1990; Zavala, 2002). This is what legitimates school in the eyes of parents from indigenous communities, even if it fails to be a friendly environment, as we will see next. But what legitimates preschool seems yet to be understood. The challenge for researchers and policy makers in any case seem to find the best ways to educate children of this age in a culturally sensitive manner.

In the case of Ana's mother for example, when she refers to too much play at preschool, it seems play is excluded from her understanding of school learning. However, in Andean cultures, children learn a good deal through playing, participating, observing and imitating (Anderson, 1994; Bolin, 2006; Ortiz and Yamamoto, 1994). Play is therefore not a strange way of learning for Andean

¹⁰ Results presented by Libia Rengifo (ARPI – Indigenous People's Regional Association) at the IBIS National Commission of Programmes meeting, Lima, November 27th 2008.

people. Even adults exhibit a playful culture, by sometimes devising competitive games when working in groups. However, play for its own sake can be seen as wasting time, as we will see next in the case study of Felipe, and thus a careful balance needs to be struck between play, learning and work. If this cultural context could be used more wisely by schools, newer approaches to learning, such as using play and child-centred pedagogies, could be better understood by indigenous parents.

Despite Ana's advantages regarding the transition to primary school, namely having a relatively long experience of educational institutions, moving up with her preschool classmates, and moving to a school in the same village and next to her preschool, she experienced difficulties in adapting to first grade.

The teacher confirms Ana had problems in adapting to the class, fought with her classmates and got distracted easily. Later she adapted better but her school work was only average. The teacher thinks that this was due to lack of family support with homework. But how was Ana herself experiencing school? Apart from the lack of any kind of structured programme or informal strategy to support the transition to primary school, there were many discontinuities between her previous educational environments and the primary school: bigger buildings, more and older students, fewer things to play with and less time to do so, less use of Quechua and more of Spanish as a medium of instruction, and one that she especially highlighted, the presence of physical punishment when students did not learn as expected:

Interviewer: What happens when you don't do the sums, or the writing?

Ana: Hitting, Miss.

Interviewer: Who hits?

Ana: My teacher

Interviewer: With what does he punish?

Ana: With a whip, Miss.

Interviewer: Do you think that is all right or not?

Ana: No, Miss

Interviewer: Why?

Ana: They cry miss, my classmates.

Although Ana liked school, had friends there to play with, and would choose first grade over preschool, it was not easy for her to adjust to being physically punished, and this also seemed to affect her learning. Thus, when asked what she liked at school, she indicated reading, but when asked about what she did not like, she said writing *'because I can't'*. Knowing what happened when

students didn't write, as explained in the quotation above, it is easy to understand her dislike of writing and the tension she might feel about learning to write. It is also surprising that the teacher blamed Ana's home environment so easily and did not examine his own practice of physically punishing children when they made mistakes or consider its effects on their learning.

There is a further dimension on Ana's uneasy adaptation to primary school. From what we have seen so far, the school is offering Ana a deficient image of herself, focusing on her limitations (her poor command of Spanish, her difficulties in writing), and not in what she is capable of doing. And Ana is in fact a very skillful young girl.

During our first visit in 2007, when she was only five years old, we observed how she helped her grandmother with the cattle, walked alone from home to preschool, helped with the cooking, laundry and cleaning, fed her hens and guinea pigs and joined her mother in grazing the flock of sheep and cows. The next year we could see she continued learning new things such as running errands or selling vegetables in the local market. One could see that her daily life offered varied learning opportunities for this little girl – learning skills quite different from those she would learn at school, but which were nonetheless useful for becoming a full member of her family, community and culture. And, most importantly, it provided a learning process in which she could take credit for what she was capable of doing, and did not criticize her for what she could not do (as this would be learned when the time came).

However, Ana's schooling seems to neglect all these dimensions in Ana's life, and does not take account of either her language or her culture in the learning process offered to her. Most indicators of quality education do not include this as a variable to be measured or consider it part of the concept of 'quality education'. Ana's case may contribute to understanding why this should be different.

3.3. Felipe

Felipe, like Ana, was in his last year of preschool when we visited him for the first time, in 2007, at the age of five, and the next year he was attending first grade. Felipe lived with his parents and four siblings, although during our second visit his father had migrated temporarily to the Amazon to work in cash crop agriculture. Felipe spoke mostly Quechua and used Spanish only if required, but was very shy when doing so. Like Ana, he had attended two years of preschool and, before that, the *Wawa Wasi*.

Felipe spent most of his free time outside school playing. He just loved playing. His mother and his teacher confirmed this. Felipe himself showed how much he liked playing. One fascinating quality he has is the way he manages to use everything around him to do that.

He goes to the mountain to walk, for the sake of it. ... He makes kites, he plays with seeds and with wool ... he likes to make parachutes ... airplanes, helicopters he makes. ... he wants to make a car ... out of mud ... He goes away with those little girls to play. They play with pencils, they make little holes in the corn ... they go to the swings, to hang from the rope ... he collects little sticks and counts them ... he gets potatoes and counts them.
(Felipe's mother)

Although his mother seemed to think that so much play was a waste of time, it is evident from her account that Felipe was also using his play to learn, to count, to practise, to be creative and to be with others. It was indeed noticeable when spending time with him, even for a short period, that he managed to use almost everything he had at hand as a toy or to invent a game, such as filling a plastic bottle with dirt and then blow it into the wind; or even empty cans he filled with sand and used as moulds. He climbed trees, took a stick into the garden to walk, or played with his older sister, running, falling, and running again to catch her or to be caught.

Play was central to Felipe's life, as with many other children of his age. It is a vehicle for joy, enjoyment, learning, care, nurturing, socialising, and exploration of the world. However, this was not always evident to the adults around him, such as his mother or even his teacher. But Felipe's life was not all play. He joined his mother in the hills around the community to graze the flock or to work on the farmland, helped with cooking, washing, feeding the animals, caring for younger siblings and fetching water and wood. Felipe therefore had a very active life, a passion for play and several learning opportunities and spaces beyond school. This is important in understanding how he experienced his transition to the first grade.

Felipe's teacher considered him to be a low achiever and a problem child, since he purposely missed some classes and hung around the village. Each time his mother found him, she took him by force back to the school. The teacher blamed the home environment for Felipe's behaviour (because the mother punished him and the father was away). However, the teacher also used physical punishment when children misbehaved or made mistakes, and other children also hit Felipe:

Interviewer: What you don't like at school?

Felipe: The teacher ... he hits us, with the whip ... he is mean ...

Interviewer: What happens if you don't do your homework?

Felipe: He hits me.

Interviewer: Who?

Felipe: My class's monitor.

The school environment is hard for Felipe, a boy who is used to walking through the fields and mountains and playing with his siblings. It is not that he is unfamiliar with care and educational institutions, since he has attended both the *Wawa Wasi* and preschool. But the contrast between preschool and first grade seemed to have been very severe for him, and also different to what he had expected. Indeed, when we visited him in 2007, we asked him about going to school. He said he thought it would be nice, and that there would be more and nicer toys; he was going to study and do homework and he would learn to write. He seemed excited about all this. However, primary school turned out to be different from his expectations, a place with less colour on the walls and fewer toys (according to Felipe), without the swing he had liked so much at preschool, and with much less space for playing. For a boy who loved to play, that could definitely be difficult:

Interviewer: How do you explain it [Felipe's poor performance]? Does he have trouble concentrating?

Felipe's teacher: No, he likes to play – he says he likes to play. Why does he likes to play? 'Because I like to play, teacher. In preschool we played.' ... he entered [first grade] with all his [preschool] classmates. He wanted to be with them, to go out, to play. ... the kid was very motivated at the beginning, but now he is inhibited. He does not want to come to school.

Both his mother and his teacher highlighted his preference for play, and neither of them suggested problems with his learning abilities or intelligence, or with discipline issues. When we looked at the ways in which he played, both from his mother's account above and from observing him, it was evident Felipe also loved to learn through playing. The school however does not seem to engage with this characteristic of Felipe, but instead pushes him away through the use of violence and the exclusion of a whole dimension of his daily life. So, if Felipe was a poor achiever because he preferred to play than go to school, should we ask what was wrong with Felipe or should we ask what was wrong with the school? Felipe's case points to a still unresolved issue in early childhood education, which is how much the culture, identity and personalities of young children are indeed addressed through school pedagogies, and how much they still have to be put aside 'for the sake of schooling'. This question is relevant for many children in Peru and in many other countries. In Peru

it also leads to a second question: how much does the school address, respect and value the identity of indigenous children?

This paper stresses the need to consider the indigenous identity of the children in order to better understand their transitions. Indeed, the place cultural identity has in the different educational settings children go through may have a significant effect on how they adapt, or not, to that educational setting. In the case of Felipe, who shows obvious signs of not adapting well to first grade, one should remember that he was starting school in a language and a culture that was not familiar to him.

Thus, at preschool Felipe was considered shy and ‘slow’, but as we have seen in the case of Ana (section 3.2) the use of Spanish in preschool does not enable the children to show what they actually know. Primary school reinforces this trend, with Spanish as the medium of instruction, and teachers coming from the city, who are foreign to the culture of the village. Moreover, indigenous culture seems to be forbidden in Felipe’s school, as if it were only a place for ‘modern’ habits:

Interviewer: Children nowadays don’t wear *chumpis* [indigenous belts] at school, do they? Why do they forbid it?

Felipe’s mother: They say, ‘Madam, you send your children as if [they were] in the Indian highlands,’ when we send them like that. ... They say things like that to us, Madam.

Interviewer: And what do you think about that?

Felipe’s mother: When they say that, we say, ‘I would have to buy a new belt.’ That’s what we say, Madam.

Interviewer: Do you ask other people, other mothers or children, if they want children go with *chumpis*?

Felipe’s mother: Not any more, Madam. I don’t want to any more. The other children also tease him when he wears a *chumpi*.

This interview extract reveals a hostile attitude from school and teachers to parents, in which they undervalue indigenous dress codes as if they were not appropriate for a place like school. Clothes, as a visible marker of indigenous identity, are one of the first things to be suppressed. Indigenous dressing is not allowed in school, it is used only at home, in the community, after school hours. And like *chumpis*, the woven shawls the women and girls use in the village (*llicllas*) are only seen on girls after school hours.

Another example of this undervaluing of indigenous markers of identity is the extensive practice of asking children to remove their shoes when they enter the classroom, so that they are barefoot: The small *ojotas* (indigenous sandals) of first grade children were all together next to the front door, allegedly to avoid making the classroom dirty. Needless to say, the teachers wear their shoes.¹¹

These are just some of the most visible examples of a widespread practice – the exclusion of indigenous culture and markers of identity from formal schooling. It is not only language, a powerful vehicle for learning, but also indigenous knowledge, practices and ways of learning that are completely ignored or actively excluded by the school. Parents are very aware of that, as the interview above shows, but feel forced to accept it since it is not only teachers but also fellow classmates who will enforce the required dress code through mocking if it is not followed.

Parents deliberately decide to send their children to school despite knowing about the marginalization of indigenous languages and culture in school settings. They do so with the expectation that the school will teach their children to speak Spanish, and to read and write it, as well as urban manners, and thus will enable their children to interact better in cities, continue with education, get better jobs and overcome the discrimination towards indigenous peoples. Young Lives data for the Older Cohort in Peru has shown that if parents have more resources, they will invest them in sending their children to the provincial or district capital, where the dominance of Spanish and *mestizo* culture would be stronger, but where their children may learn more of both (Ames and Rojas, 2011).

The rationale of this decision needs to be placed in the context of discrimination present in Peruvian society and the marginalization that indigenous peoples face: parents want their children to have a better future and a way out of poverty, and further or higher education is key for that. Secondary school and higher education are only offered with Spanish as a medium of instruction, and thus these parents' choice is understandable. King (2000: 177) has noted a similar attitude in the case of Qichua speakers in Ecuador, where competence in Spanish is essential for social and economic success and mobility. As I have argued before, parents want their children to 'become somebody in life', but that might come at the price of sacrificing part of their indigenous identity (Ames, 2002). Although all of this may be clear to adults – but nonetheless experienced with ambiguity and stress – for children like Felipe and Ana it may be harder to understand and may be one of the factors that make their transition to first grade so difficult.

¹¹ This is a widely extended practice in rural schools in the Andes. I have seen it in other neighbouring regions such as Cusco.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight that, despite of being selected for contrasting purposes, the case studies of Ana and Felipe did not show marked gender differences: both started primary school at the mandatory age, with preschool experience and with positive expectations, but found limited time and space to play, encountered physical punishment associated with learning, and felt devalued in several ways by the school; the result in both cases was a poor school performance. Both however were very capable children in the context of their homes and community, and contributed in several ways to domestic and productive activities, from herding to looking after younger siblings. Their experiences however may change and diverge in the future, as they grow older and new responsibilities and expectations associated with gender transform their daily activities and routines in ways that may in turn affect schooling. Future transitions therefore may be more affected by gender issues if that is the case (see for example Ames and Rojas, 2011 on their analysis of the older cohort of children).¹²

4. Discussion and conclusions

Indigenous children in the Americas were excluded from education for most of the twentieth century. However, as the region has progressed towards Universal Primary Education in the last few decades, more and more indigenous children have had access to schooling. Nevertheless, the reports of scholarly researchers and experts reports have warned that mere access to educational institutions does not amount to a fulfillment of the right to education (Tomasevski 2004, cited by Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 2011). Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2011) discuss a restricted definition of ‘access’ as enrolment in school and consider that if indigenous or minority children are not educated through the medium of a language that they understand, then they are effectively being denied equal access to education.

Indeed, available statistics alert us to the fact that, despite high enrolment rates, Quechua children in Peru still encounter several educational inequalities. However, more attention is still needed to understand how these inequalities are lived and experienced by children themselves and enacted by schools as institutions. This paper aimed to focus on children’s experiences and the micro-interactions produced between children, teachers, parents and communities, because, as Cummins (2009: 263) states, ‘these micro-interactions form an interpersonal space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity are negotiated ... as such, the micro-interactions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or failure.’

¹² Young Lives will collect data on the same children again in 2011 and 2014. This will provide an opportunity to examine patterns and developments in relation to different transitions along time.

The case studies analysed here have shown that the daily school experience for indigenous children entails constant messages that undervalue or neglect their culture and language and their very identity as indigenous children. In doing that, the school experience not only contributes to the disempowering of indigenous students and communities, but also prompts their academic failure by denying them the tools and motivation for cognitive engagement and identity investment, both central to optimizing learning (Cummins, 2009). Indeed, increasing evidence points to the fact that the inclusion of the language and culture of the community within the school practices, pedagogies and curriculum is critical to the success of formal learning (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008; McCarty, 2011).

There have indeed been different types of criticisms of traditional schooling for excluding indigenous languages and cultures and for a bias towards homogeneity and linguistic assimilation; the need for an intercultural approach has been therefore sounding in the past two decades (Aikman, 1995; Pozzi Escott et al., 1991; Trapnell, 2009; Zúñiga, 2008). However, despite progress towards including an intercultural approach in educational policy, several studies confirm that national policies in Peru and other countries in the region suffer from inconsistencies, contradictions, and above all, they hardly get implemented as stated (Castillo and Caicedo, 2008; McLean, 2008; Sir, 2008; Valdiviezo, 2010; Zúñiga, 2008). As a result, despite sometimes progressive policies, ‘the reality of indigenous education remains inadequate’, as Tinajero and Englander (2011: 172) state in the case of Mexico and as the evidence examined here also show in the case of Peru.

Several intercultural bilingual education programmes have been implemented across the region with positive results (see for example Ames, 2005; Zavala, 2007; Zúñiga, 2008), and show that there are indeed alternatives, as other authors working in the field of indigenous education have stressed (see Benson, 2002; Cummins, 2009; McCarty, 2011; Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2011). However, in many cases, these programmes are experimental, and cover only small groups of the population, while most of the public education system still lacks such an approach at the school level: as stated earlier, 63 per cent of indigenous children in Peru attend schools with Spanish as the only medium of instruction, like Felipe and Ana. Two notable exceptions in the region are Bolivia and Ecuador, countries engaged in educational reforms with a strong component of intercultural bilingual education; however the actual reach of these programmes is limited and there is still a need to further empower indigenous people and children and to transform the school system as a whole – and not only for indigenous children (see Drange, 2011; Howard, 2009; Oviedo and Wildemeersch, 2008).

Although the findings of this research cannot be generalized to the entire population of indigenous children, they offer a detailed picture of children's experiences, incorporating both the perspective of different actors and that of the children themselves. This is an especially important feature of this study, which highlights the importance of listening to young children's voices, inasmuch as they offer acute insights into the factors affecting their own learning and school experiences. Indeed, children have the right to be heard on all the matters that affect them, including education.¹³

However, some authors point out that there are few studies dedicated to children's opinions on their own educational experiences, especially those of younger children (Evans and Fuller, 1998; McCallum et al., 2000). Moreover, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) expressed its concern about the prevalence of educational environments that neither allow children to express their opinion nor take into account children's opinions. This paper contributes therefore to showing not only the need to listen to children's voices, but also the possibilities opened up by doing so, both for research and policy planning purposes.

This paper has also highlighted a particular moment in the lives of indigenous children like Felipe and Ana, one that requires special attention, since educational transitions are key moments for children's educational careers (Einarsdóttir, 2007). I argue that if this is true for children in general, it is even more so for indigenous children, who enter not only another setting but even another language and culture. Despite the importance and implications of the transition to primary school, this study found that there are no institutional guidelines or structured programmes, at national or local levels, to support educational transitions, either for Peruvian children in general or for indigenous children in particular. This situation has been also reported for other countries in the region (Alvarado and Suarez, 2009; Save the Children, 2007).

One of the few studies on educational transitions among young indigenous children found that positive transitions are based on good relations among the actors involved: children, parents and teachers (Alvarado and Suarez, 2009). However, the case studies examined here show tensions, distrust, mutual blaming and little mutual support among the actors involved. Alvarado and Suarez also indicate the importance of children's ability to communicate in achieving good performance in school. This is evidently absent in the case studies presented here, where the downplay of Quechua prevents children from fully communicating with their teachers. Similarly, these authors identify factors such as good relationships between children and teachers; a pertinent, diversified and inclusive curriculum; the recognition of children's potential; strengthening identity and subjectivity; and family participation in classroom process as necessary to facilitate positive transitions. None of

¹³ As stated by the Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

these elements was present in the cases studied here; on the contrary, miscommunication was evident, teachers had a poor opinion of the children's potential, the curriculum did not include the children's culture, and far from strengthening their identity, the school experience undermined it.

The results of this study therefore highlight the need not only to support processes of transition, but also to include the issues of language, culture and identity when doing so. Indeed, although the research on early childhood transition is abundant in Europe, the UK and Australia, more attention is needed on how such transitions are experienced in contexts of ethnic and cultural diversity. Not only the indigenous children of the Americas, but also children from minority groups all over the world are increasingly entering educational environments at an earlier age than before and experiencing new cultural worlds when doing so.

The undervaluing and exclusion from school of young indigenous children's identities at this early stage represents considerable stress and aggression for children, and threatens their very right to education. Including indigenous language and culture in school practice is by no means an easy process, but a complex one, inasmuch as power relationships in the broader society express themselves in the negotiation of identity between teachers and students (Cummins 2009). Moreover, as Tinajero and Englander (2011) point out, the systemic inequality that affects indigenous peoples is both reproduced and challenged through educational systems. Indeed, contradictory discourses coexist in the Peruvian school system today: one that calls for valuing cultural diversity and interculturality on the one hand; and on the other hand, one that aims to modernize and 'civilize' indigenous ways of life. These discourses may overlap or disguise each other in multiple ways. Because of this, schools and teachers need to confront critically issues of language, culture and identity, and examine the ways they approach them. They need also to listen to children when doing so and understand the impact of their practices on children's educational experiences. Only when this happens will children, parents and teachers be able to build more positive transitions and learning experiences and fully realize children's right to education.

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