

STORY

Javier Chambi: A teacher with a warm heart

Javier Chambi is the teacher of a bilingual multigrade school in Cuyuni, a community in the district of Ccatca, in Quispicanchi, Cusco. Javier has a warm heart and has a quite interesting methodology for teaching reading and writing that motivates kids. He writes some paragraphs in Quechua in the blackboard from which children have to make a song that talk about the potato harvest, just now that the crop is in all its glory.

How they enjoy singing in Quechua! How they recreate, through music, the agricultural practices they inherited from their ancestors. Javier, with great skills, uses his knowledge and cultural background to teach children how to read. This song that resembles agricultural chores is expressed in altered phrases, in syllables that get into words written in the blackboard and children grab them easily.

Boys and girls from first and second grade approach the blackboard, write the phrases they were just singing and then they identify the subject, verb and predicate. As simple as this: adapted to suit their daily context and language, children are learning to read and write in Quechua, the language they speak at home.

Parting from common daily activities they talk and collectively elaborate texts and phrases. They learn spelling and understand grammar and word morphology. They are playing, but also learning to read and write. Not one but hundreds of children learn one day in Quechua and the following day in Spanish. Combining lecture hours they learn both languages.

Maria raises her hand in second grade class. She is eight and the elder of five siblings. *"I like to come to school because I learn to read and write but I also like to play"* – she tells us. She says that at break time she loves to go out to play.

The teacher explains that the methodology of learning to read memorizing syllables is no good anymore. He also states that reading and writing skills are developed based in the community interests: the agricultural calendar, the sowing and harvest seasons, the religious festivities, and other relevant activities that occur within the community. Culture occupies the core of all learning activities. That is how, what is taught becomes relevant, as children feel proud of being who they are.

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Javier mentions that dealing with parents has not been so easy. Their imaginary of inclusion meant that their children should only learn Spanish. Most of them were discriminated or even attacked for speaking their mother tongues at school. This is hard to forget. In parent's assemblies, Javier and other UGEL authorities have persuaded parents that their children must be able to dominate their mother tongues, as this is the right of every child. They have also explained them that students will learn better in the tongue they are used to speak and then the transit into Spanish will be much easier. Parents, little by little, become convinced that this is true, when they see their child progress.

Bernardino Lipe, Ccatca Major, says they are supporting this educational policy as it brings better results in children which their mother tongue is Quechua. Each time there are more teachers and parents who understand that it is not possible to teach, nor learn in a language you do not understand, and that Quechua children have the right to have schools, teachers and books that talk to them in their own language. Local and regional authorities are getting convinced too. Today 400 schools in Cusco are progressively adapting an Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) approach.

This initiative is promoted and supported by UNICEF and local NGOs with the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and is in line with Peru's educational policies. Working towards narrowing the gaps in education for children whose mother tongue is not Spanish is a challenge for the following years. IBE is a priority of the current central government and of many regional governments.

Generating research about cultural contexts, producing text books in various Peruvian indigenous tongues, training teachers and driving more investment into education is part of the challenge. Political conditions are given. Let's give Javier and the thousands of teachers worried on how to best teach children whose mother tongue is different from Spanish, the necessary tools to succeed in their jobs.

Spanish version

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