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José Diaz: Applying bilingual education is strengthening the democracy

Zinc Teacher his whole life, trainer of trainers: this statement describes José Diaz, current Regional Director of Education in Ucayali. He has the huge responsibility to lead the educational policy of a region, where there are 45 000 of children who speak one of the 14 tongues different from Spanish and only 450 bilingual teachers.

“Monolingual and bilingual education are complementary fields. Multiculturalism is not an exclusive heritage of indigenous people but of Spanish-speakers too”, says José.

In the Ucayali region, some years ago a differentiated and pertinent educational policy started to rise, based on providing a Quality Regular Basic Education (monolingual) and an Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) that will drive indigenous amazon children and adolescents out of exclusion.

As it may seem like a policy going against the flow, Diaz trusts that results will show in the medium and long term. This is why he does not give up in despair and stands steady in IBE promotion and defense. “When I see students in rural schools being taught in Spanish, and more than one of them is not able to understand as he only speaks Ashaninka, I reassure that only by applying IBE we will contribute to strengthen the democracy, the equity of opportunities” he states.

Unfortunately - he goes on - there are native leaders that bet for “spanishize”, as they believe if not, they will be left out. What they need to understand is that children need to learn first in their mother tongues and then, gradually incorporate Spanish. This is how learning and creativity, passports towards progress, is encouraged.

DREU proposal goes for preserving native tongues. During their first years at school, children learn in their mother tongues, gradually Spanish is incorporated and, on the last stage, learning is exclusively in Spanish.

On the other hand, 99% of schools with an IBE approach are one-teacher multigrade in primary and multi-teacher in secondary. José is also very concerned for not having bilingual teachers for science topics. He is aware that inclusion is not only a linguistic issue but has to deal also with scientific and technological development. There he finds a huge need for empowering amazon children and adolescents with both, indigenous and modern technology”.

José Diaz is conscious that IBE has started giving its first steps and that success will depend on its majority, to increasing the number of bilingual teachers who are proficient in the teaching strategies of amazon languages. “We must promote interest on bilingual education among undergraduates of native communities and also create the conditions so Spanish-speaker teachers could get interested

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in learning Amazonian tongues and are willing to come and work in our communities”, Mr. Diaz comments.

He tells us about isolated experiences of Spanish-speaking teachers that read and write perfectly in Shipibo. He trusts that one day each and every indigenous community will have this kind of spaces which will allow teachers to integrate with the communities.

Emergency

Multilingualism is not the only challenge Jose Diaz has to face as Regional Director of Education. He needs also to respond to emergencies caused by nature.

In the last two years Ucayali has suffered from the heaviest rains of the past 25 years. This generated that most of the schools delayed by 45 or 60 days the start of the school year. However, the DREU did not give up their annual learning objectives. With UNICEF support they developed a curriculum to face the emergency.

They designed a state-of-a-kind curriculum that prioritizes capacity development and competencies with a cross sectoral approach on environmental education. They used the floods as an educational resource oriented to develop an emergency risk prevention culture.

“We are demonstrating advances here in Ucayali. We are establishing a solid base for the modernization of education. We know what we want to achieve on education and which are our priority policies” he emphasizes.

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