

Implementing Language Policy in Intercultural Education: Evidence from Southwestern Potosí, Bolivia

Implementación de la Política Lingüística y Educación Intercultural en el Sudoeste de Potosí, Bolivia

Implementação da Política Linguística na Educação Intercultural no Sudoeste de Potosí, Bolívia.

Fecha de presentación: 30/01/2026, Fecha de Aceptación: 23/02/2026, Fecha de publicación: 01/03/2026



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Cita sugerida (APA, séptima edición)

Espinoza-Montero, C. W. (2026) Implementing Language Policy in Intercultural Education: Evidence from Southwestern Potosí, Bolivia. *Revista Ciencia & Sociedad*, 6(S1), 96-104.

ABSTRACT

Since 2009, Bolivia has recognized education as a fundamental, decolonizing and multilingual human right, underpinned by Laws 070 and 269, which establish the intracultural, intercultural, and multilingual educational model. This study examines whether these policies effectively contribute to the decolonization of the education system and the revitalization of Quechua, or if they reproduce dynamics of cultural assimilation at the regional level. We used a qualitative approach based on the documentary analysis of public policies and official programs, including the Regionalized Curriculum and the Supplementary Training Program for Teachers. The results show a persistent gap between educational policy and practice. Although the legal framework promotes the use of Quechua, its implementation tends to be limited to formal certifications, without ensuring systematic pedagogical use. Additionally, factors such as internal migration and the historical legacy of Spanish hegemony continue to hinder the intergenerational transmission of the language. It is concluded that educational decolonization requires stronger implementation strategies and community engagement that transcends legal recognition.

Key Words: Decolonization; Education, Intercultural; Linguistic policies; Plurilingual, Quechua; Regionalized.

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RESUMEN

Desde 2009, Bolivia reconoce la educación como un derecho humano fundamental, descolonizante y plurilingüe, sustentado en las Leyes 070 y 269, que establecen el modelo educativo intracultural, intercultural y plurilingüe. Este estudio analiza si dichas políticas contribuyen efectivamente a la descolonización del sistema educativo y a la revitalización del quechua, o si reproducen dinámicas de asimilación cultural en el ámbito regional. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo basado en el análisis documental de políticas públicas y programas oficiales, incluyendo el Currículo Regionalizado y el Programa de Formación Complementaria para Docentes. Los resultados muestran una brecha persistente entre la normativa y la práctica educativa. Aunque el marco legal promueve el uso del quechua, su implementación tiende a limitarse a certificaciones formales, sin garantizar un uso pedagógico sistemático. Asimismo, factores como la migración interna y la hegemonía histórica del español continúan debilitando la transmisión intergeneracional de la lengua. Se concluye que la descolonización educativa requiere estrategias de implementación más sólidas y un compromiso sociocomunitario que trascienda el reconocimiento jurídico.

Palabras clave: Descolonización, Educación, Intercultural, Plurilingüe, Políticas lingüísticas, Quechua; Regionalizado.

RESUMO

Desde 2009, a Bolívia reconhece a educação como um direito humano fundamental, descolonizador e plurilíngue, sustentado nas Leis 070 e 269, que estabelecem o modelo educacional intracultural, intercultural e plurilíngue. Este estudo analisa se essas políticas contribuem efetivamente para a descolonização do sistema educacional e para a revitalização do quéchua, ou se reproduzem dinâmicas de assimilação cultural no âmbito regional. Foi empregada uma abordagem qualitativa baseada na análise documental de políticas públicas e programas oficiais, incluindo o Currículo Regionalizado e o Programa de Formação Complementar para Professores. Os resultados mostram uma lacuna persistente entre a normativa e a prática educativa. Embora o quadro legal promova o uso do quéchua, sua implementação tende a limitar-se a certificações formais, sem garantir um uso pedagógico sistemático. Além disso, fatores como a migração interna e a hegemonia histórica do espanhol continuam a enfraquecer a transmissão intergeracional da língua. Conclui-se que a descolonização educativa requer estratégias de implementação mais sólidas e um engajamento sociocomunitário que ultrapasse o reconhecimento jurídico.

Palavras-chave: Descolonização; Educação; Intercultural; Plurilíngue; Políticas linguísticas, Quéchua e regionalizado.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2009 Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia redefined education as a fundamental human right structured around decolonization, intraculturality, interculturality, and multilingualism. This constitutional reconfiguration repositioned language from a neutral communicative medium to a site of epistemic legitimacy, political recognition, and sociocultural reproduction. In line with contemporary scholarship, language policy is understood here as a multilayered process in which ideological orientations, regulatory frameworks, and institutional practices interact dynamically (Johnson, 2013; Shohamy, 2022). Within this perspective, multilingual education constitutes both a redistributive and a symbolic intervention in historically stratified linguistic ecologies (García et al., 2021).

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Bolivia operationalizes this paradigm through Law No. 070 (Avelino Siñani - Elizardo Pérez) and Law No. 269 on Linguistic Rights and Policies, which recognize 36 Indigenous languages as co-official with Spanish (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). These instruments seek to institutionalize the Intracultural, Intercultural, and Multilingual Education Model (IIEM) and to promote Indigenous language revitalization within formal schooling. However, recent research across Latin America indicates that constitutional recognition frequently coexists with implementation gaps, limited pedagogical integration, and persistent hierarchies favoring dominant languages (Heugh et al., 2021). Revitalization efforts often remain discursive when not accompanied by sustained teacher preparation, curricular coherence, and community-based language transmission (May, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

From a decolonial standpoint, educational transformation requires dismantling the coloniality of power embedded in linguistic hierarchies and knowledge validation regimes (Mignolo, 2021; Zembylas, 2023). Accordingly, this study adopts an integrated conceptual model combining:

- Language Policy Implementation Theory, which differentiates between declared policy and practiced policy (Johnson, 2020).
- Critical Interculturality, which interrogates whether intercultural discourse translates into structural redistribution of epistemic authority (Walsh, 2012).
- Language Revitalization Frameworks, which emphasize intergenerational transmission, functional domains of use, and community agency (May, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

Within this framework, Quechua represents a strategic case. Despite its demographic vitality, its sociolinguistic position remains conditioned by migration dynamics, socioeconomic stratification, and the enduring prestige of Spanish as the language of upward mobility. Although policy instruments such as the Regionalized Curriculum for the Quechua Nation and the Supplementary Training Program for Teachers (PROFOCOM) aim to operationalize multilingual education locally, empirical evidence suggests a persistent divergence between regulatory discourse and classroom practice in rural and semi-urban contexts.

The central research problem, therefore, concerns the degree to which Bolivia's intercultural and multilingual policies generate substantive decolonizing transformations or reproduce symbolic inclusion without functional redistribution of linguistic capital. The objective of this study is to critically examine the coherence, scope, and implementation logic of key policy instruments governing intercultural and multilingual education in the southwestern region of Potosí, with particular attention to their implications for Quechua revitalization. Through qualitative documentary analysis, the study contributes to current debates on language policy enactment, decolonial educational reform, and the structural conditions necessary for sustainable multilingual transformation in Latin America.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted under an interpretive qualitative paradigm, grounded in the assumption that language policy implementation is socially constructed, context-dependent, and mediated by institutional, ideological, and historical forces. Within qualitative research traditions, the study is situated in three complementary categories: (1) interpretive research, which seeks to understand meaning-making processes from participants' perspectives; (2) descriptive-exploratory research, aimed at documenting and examining under-researched processes of policy enactment in specific sociolinguistic settings; and (3) a qualitative case study, focusing on a bounded regional context in southwestern Potosí. Interpretive qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for examining how educational actors negotiate policy mandates within localized sociolinguistic

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ecologies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021; Tracy, 2020). Case study research, furthermore, enables in-depth exploration of complex educational phenomena embedded in real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

The research adopts a qualitative multi-method design, combining (a) documentary policy analysis and (b) field-based inquiry. Recent scholarship in language policy underscores that implementation must be examined as both text and practice, requiring attention to macro-level regulatory discourse and micro-level classroom enactment (Johnson, 2020). Accordingly, this design integrates structural analysis of normative frameworks with empirical exploration of pedagogical realities.

The study was conducted in the southwestern region of Potosí, Bolivia, characterized by significant Quechua-speaking populations and the implementation of the Intracultural, Intercultural, and Multilingual Education Model (IIEM). The target population consisted of secondary-level teachers in public institutions implementing intercultural and multilingual education policies in Quechua-speaking contexts. A non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit participants with direct experience in policy implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Selection criteria included a minimum of three years of teaching experience, active involvement in multilingual or intercultural educational environments, and prior participation in PROFOCOM or related training initiatives. The final sample comprised 25 teachers from five public secondary institutions.

The documentary corpus included foundational legislative and curricular texts shaping intercultural education in Bolivia, such as the Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (2012), Law No. 070, Law No. 269, the Regionalized Curriculum for the Quechua Nation, and official PROFOCOM documentation (2019–2024). These sources provided the structural and ideological framework for analysis.

Data collection unfolded in two complementary phases. First, documentary analysis was conducted through systematic classification of texts according to normative hierarchy—constitutional, legislative, curricular, and programmatic—allowing structured examination of policy articulation. Second, fieldwork was carried out over three months. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) explored teachers' interpretations of intercultural policy, classroom language practices, challenges in Quechua implementation, and institutional support mechanisms. Non-participant classroom observations, guided by a structured checklist, documented instructional language use, functional domains of Quechua, interactional dynamics, and intercultural pedagogical practices. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; observational notes were systematized immediately after each session to enhance reliability (Tracy, 2020).

Data were analyzed through thematic qualitative content analysis using both deductive and inductive coding strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analytical categories included policy ideology versus enactment, conceptualizations of interculturality, functional uses of Quechua, teacher agency and constraints, and structural mediating factors. Cross-source triangulation strengthened interpretive validity. Trustworthiness was ensured through data and theoretical triangulation, maintenance of an audit trail, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Tracy, 2020). Rather than statistical generalization, the study pursues analytical generalization, contributing to critical debates on language policy enactment and decolonial educational reform in Latin America (Johnson, 2020).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis of the selected policy documents, guided by the research objective of examining how interculturality and the promotion of Quechua are conceptualized and operationalized within Bolivia's educational framework, produced a set of interrelated findings organized around three analytical categories: (1) interculturality as policy discourse, (2) language promotion and certification regimes, and (3) structural and sociolinguistic constraints.

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Interculturality as Policy Discourse and Pedagogical Practice.

The first category reveals that interculturality functions primarily as a normative and ideological construct within official discourse. Across the analyzed corpus, particularly in Law No. 070, intercultural education is framed as a transformative project aimed at dismantling colonial hierarchies, restoring Indigenous epistemologies, and promoting social justice. This discursive positioning aligns with decolonial and intercultural theoretical frameworks in Latin American education (Walsh, 2009), which conceptualize interculturality as a political-epistemic shift rather than mere cultural coexistence.

However, consistent with findings reported by López (2021), the present analysis indicates a significant gap between ideological affirmation and pedagogical operationalization. While interculturality is robustly articulated at the level of principles, the documents provide limited curricular or didactic guidance for embedding intercultural approaches across subject areas. This confirms broader critiques in intercultural bilingual education (IBE) research, where interculturality often remains declarative rather than structurally embedded in classroom practice (García, 2009; Hornberger, 2008).

From a scientific perspective, this finding underscores the need to conceptualize interculturality not only as discourse but as an empirically observable pedagogical practice. It implies that future research should operationalize interculturality through measurable classroom indicators, thereby contributing to a more rigorous evaluative framework in policy implementation studies.

The second category focuses on the institutional positioning of Quechua within the education system. The documents recognize Quechua as an official language and promote its inclusion in schooling, particularly through regional curricular adaptations such as the Regionalized Curriculum for the Quechua Nation. This reflects a broader regional trend toward linguistic recognition and curricular contextualization (Hornberger & King, 2001).

Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates that policy instruments such as Law No. 269 and the PROFOCOM prioritize teacher certification in Indigenous languages as a central mechanism for implementation. While professional accreditation is a necessary component of institutional strengthening, the documents implicitly equate certification with effective pedagogical use. This administrative logic mirrors what Hornberger (2006) describes as the “technical compliance” model of language policy, where institutional indicators substitute for classroom transformation.

Comparatively, research in other multilingual contexts has shown that linguistic competence alone does not guarantee the sustained use of minority languages as media of instruction (García y Wei, 2014). The present findings resonate with these studies, suggesting that without sustained pedagogical support, material development, and community engagement, certification risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

The implication for educational policy research is significant: effective language revitalization requires moving beyond credentialing frameworks toward dynamic models of bilingual pedagogy that address discourse practices, assessment design, and epistemic inclusion. This contributes to the scientific understanding of how macro-level language policies translate—or fail to translate—into micro-level classroom practices.

The third category highlights structural and sociolinguistic constraints that shape policy outcomes. Although the analyzed documents promote Indigenous language revitalization, they insufficiently address the broader sociolinguistic ecology marked by internal migration, urbanization, and the hegemonic status of Spanish. As López (2025) argue, language shift in Bolivia is deeply connected to socioeconomic mobility and historical stratification, factors that policy discourse tends to understate.

This finding aligns with Fishman’s (1991) theory of reversing language shift, which emphasizes that educational interventions alone are insufficient without intergenerational transmission and community-based reinforcement. Similarly, Hornberger’s (2008) continua of biliteracy framework demonstrates that the vitality of minority languages

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depends on their functional expansion across domains of power and knowledge production. The present analysis confirms that Quechua often occupies a symbolic or ceremonial role in schooling rather than functioning as a sustained medium of cognitive and academic development.

Scientifically, this has important implications for the field of language policy and planning. It suggests that effective intercultural multilingual education must integrate macrostructural analysis—economic, demographic, and ideological factors—into policy design. The findings, therefore, contribute to a more ecologically grounded understanding of language revitalization, reinforcing the argument that educational policy cannot operate in isolation from sociopolitical realities.

Taken together, these findings advance the research objective by demonstrating that Bolivia's intercultural and multilingual education policies articulate a strong decolonial vision but face challenges in pedagogical enactment and sociolinguistic sustainability. The study contributes to ongoing debates in intercultural bilingual education by empirically illustrating the tension between ideological commitment and institutional implementation. Moreover, by situating the results within established theoretical frameworks and comparative research, the discussion strengthens the scientific rigor of policy analysis in multilingual contexts and highlights critical areas for future investigation, including classroom-level ethnographic studies and longitudinal assessments of language use.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, examined in light of the research objective—namely, to analyze how interculturality and Quechua language promotion are conceptualized and operationalized within Bolivia's educational policy—reveal a structural tension between decolonial discourse and assimilationist practice. Organized according to the analytical categories of interculturality as policy discourse, Quechua promotion and certification, and sociolinguistic constraints, the results demonstrate that although the normative framework signals a paradigmatic shift, implementation remains uneven and constrained.

Within the first category, interculturality is discursively positioned as a transformative and decolonial principle, particularly in Law No. 070. The legal framework marks a departure from earlier monolingual assimilationist models by foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies and intercultural dialogue. However, consistent with Hornberger's (2009) distinction between "ideological space" and "implementational space," the present findings indicate that the discursive expansion of interculturality is not systematically translated into pedagogical practice. This aligns with Guilherme (2019) argument that interculturality risks becoming rhetorical if it is not accompanied by structural and epistemic transformation. Similar implementation gaps have been documented in rural Andean contexts (López, 2020; López, 2021), suggesting that the Bolivian case reflects broader regional dynamics rather than an isolated phenomenon.

Regarding the second category—Quechua promotion and the logic of certification—the Regionalized Curriculum for the Quechua Nation represents a meaningful attempt to contextualize schooling and legitimize Indigenous knowledge systems. This initiative resonates with intercultural bilingual education (IBE) models that advocate curricular localization (Benson & Kosonen, 2021). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that institutional emphasis on certification and formal recognition tends to equate linguistic accreditation with pedagogical effectiveness. As García and Kleifgen (2020) argue, language policies that fail to address classroom discourse practices and power relations often reproduce existing hierarchies despite progressive rhetoric. The limited functional use of Quechua as a sustained medium of instruction in the analyzed documents reinforces this concern, echoing Guilherme (2019) critique that symbolic recognition alone cannot generate epistemic justice.

The third category highlights persistent sociolinguistic asymmetries, particularly the predominance of Spanish as the default language of instruction. This finding confirms

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earlier research demonstrating that structural inequalities, urbanization, and socioeconomic mobility pressures favor dominant languages, even in officially multilingual states (López, 2025). In line with Benson and Kosonen (2021), the data suggest that multilingual education policies frequently encounter institutional inertia and resource limitations that restrict their transformative potential. The Bolivian experience thus mirrors broader Latin American patterns in which progressive policy frameworks coexist with entrenched linguistic hierarchies.

Scientifically, these findings are significant for several reasons. First, they empirically substantiate theoretical claims in language policy and planning regarding the gap between macro-level policy discourse and micro-level practice. Second, they contribute localized evidence to ongoing debates about the operationalization of interculturality, demonstrating that the effectiveness of multilingual education depends not only on legal recognition but also on sustained pedagogical support, teacher training, and sociolinguistic alignment. Finally, by situating the Bolivian case within comparative scholarship, this study strengthens the argument that language revitalization and intercultural education require systemic transformation rather than isolated regulatory reforms.

In sum, the results advance the research objective by showing that Bolivia's intercultural and multilingual policies construct a robust ideological framework, yet their practical enactment remains constrained by institutional, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic factors. These findings underscore the need for future research that integrates policy analysis with classroom-based investigation, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive scientific understanding of intercultural multilingual education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how Bolivia's intercultural and multilingual education policies are interpreted and enacted in the southwest region of Potosí. Based on the analysis, several clear conclusions can be drawn.

First, although Bolivia has established a robust normative framework for intercultural and multilingual education—particularly through Law No. 070 and complementary linguistic regulations—the implementation at the local level remains partial and structurally constrained. The findings demonstrate that Spanish continues to function as the dominant language of instruction across most classroom interactions. Consequently, Quechua is often positioned as a complementary or symbolic subject rather than as a sustained medium of knowledge production and cognitive development. This confirms the existence of a persistent gap between macro-level policy design and micro-level pedagogical practice.

Second, while teachers express positive attitudes toward intercultural education and recognize its social and cultural value, significant limitations remain in terms of pedagogical operationalization. Insufficient specialized training, limited didactic materials in Quechua, and weak institutional follow-up mechanisms restrict the effective enactment of bilingual and intercultural methodologies. Therefore, the study concludes that policy recognition alone is insufficient; sustained professional development, context-sensitive curricular guidance, and structural support systems are necessary to translate ideological commitments into consistent classroom practice.

Third, the sociolinguistic context—marked by the functional dominance of Spanish and broader socioeconomic pressures—continues to shape educational choices. This suggests that intercultural multilingual education must be addressed not only as a curricular issue but also as a sociopolitical and institutional challenge.

From a scientific perspective, these conclusions reinforce the need to analyze language policy through an implementation-oriented lens that integrates discourse, pedagogy, and sociolinguistic ecology. The study contributes localized empirical evidence to broader debates in language policy and intercultural education by demonstrating how structural conditions mediate reform outcomes.

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