Thematic Research

A RECONSTRUCTION OF ARGUMENTATION ON INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN MEXICO
A Narrative from the Northern Border

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Abstract: This text attempts to analyze the definitions of intercultural education in Mexico's institutional discourse. Reference is made to official documents from the federal government and the state government of Baja California, as part of an exercise in self-understanding and debate. The article's intent is to show the points of convergence and divergence, the problems and perplexities, as well as the relatively accelerated development of government discourse on intercultural education during the past decade. The conclusion is that institutional discourse continues to show failures and contradictions, especially with regard to the definition of culture and the orientation of school practices.

Key words: intercultural education, discourse, Baja California, Mexico.

For Ochoa and his forgetfulness

Introduction

In this paper I propose a selective, limited reconstruction of argumentation on intercultural education in Mexico, by referring to its definition in official and academic discourse. Due to a lack of space, I shall address official discourse and leave the analysis of academic discourse for another occasion. Analysis inevitably discusses history, “not as a set of note cards, but also at times as a reconstruction: a reconstruction of argumentation.” A reconstruction with data, materials and fetishes, with ruptures and continuities, as if it were a discussion, an alive and rational dialogue (Pereda, 1994a:97).

To attain this objective I shall center my attention on the federal government and the government of Baja California. The state government is used as a concrete case to analyze certain institutional connections, projects and actions related to school practices, taking into consideration that in theory, official discourse at different levels of government orients educational proceedings.

I shall start with data from the field: indigenous teachers' definitions of intercultural education. Then I shall describe government discourse, supported by documentary material: plans, programs and government reports perceived as elements of a “material viewpoint”. Next I shall present a critical analysis of the summarized discourses, and finally, some of the lessons obtained from this reconstruction.

Some Initial Data
Specialists in Mexico and Latin America agree that intercultural education has had a close relationship with indigenista policies, in contrast with the European and U.S. contexts. According to Comboni (2003:1), “based on the analysis of relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, the notion of interculturality and its derivative of bilingual intercultural education emerged from the Latin American social sciences almost three decades ago” (also Muñoz, 2002; López, 2001; Moya, 1998; Gigante, 1995).

Before intercultural discourse became dominant in the educational coverage of those “other” ethnic groups, educational policies had been oriented by assimilationist proposals; then bilingual/bicultural proposals, followed by intercultural bilingual or bilingual intercultural proposals (López, 2001; Muñoz, 2001).

Latin American precedents in intercultural education (IE) occurred in Venezuela and some nations in the Andean region in the mid 1970s (Comboni, 2003; López, 2001). In Mexico, interculturality appeared in official discourse in 1990. According to Gigante (1995), it was introduced in the general directorship of indigenous education (Dirección General de Educación Indígena--DGEI) through a simple name change: intercultural bilingual education, later called bilingual intercultural education (EIB), without any explanation for “the reasons and concepts of the new perspective”.

If the individuals referred to in the intercultural educational policies of official discourse have preferably been indigenous groups, such groups should be asked directly about their understanding of the notion. Allow me to introduce firsthand data: the responses from a group of indigenous teachers to the question, “What does intercultural education mean?” This question takes into consideration that their teaching practice should be intercultural and bilingual, according to the indigenous subsystem and the schooling they receive at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN).³

The survey was made in the city of Tijuana. The sample included 22 professors/students (12 men and 10 women) out of a total of 33 enrolled in the bachelor’s program in preschool and primary education for indigenous settings (Licenciatura en Educación Preescolar y Primaria para el Medio Indígena--LEPEPMI) at UPN. All the respondents have completed more than four semesters and have a minimum of two years of teaching experience; they work in urban “bilingual schools” where most students are mestizos. The teachers are natives of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Michoacán and Hidalgo, with the exception of a Mixtec teacher born in Tijuana. The respondents’ time of residence in the border city of Tijuana has been between two and ten years. The ethnic groups in the sample are distributed among Mixtecs, P’urhépechas, Nahua and Popolucas.⁴

The responses were grouped as follows:

• “It is education that permits relations or exchanges between different cultures” (21%).
• “It is when group particulars are taken into consideration at school” (17%).
• “It is about interaction between different cultures, without losing one’s own culture” (10%).

³ Translator’s note: The terms, indigenismo and indigenista, are left in Spanish to reflect the author’s definition of indigenismo in Mexico as a product of non-Indians’ interest (not free from paternalism) in Indians; in government policies, indigenismo has been aimed primarily at reproducing the colonial situation within Indian groups, along with their condition as a sociological minority.
• “Exclusive education for indigenous people or teaching children in their native language” (10%).
• “Education outside of Mexico or the exchange of experiences between teachers from Mexico and the United States” (10%).
• “Joint work among culture” (sic) (10%).
• No response (10%).
• “Education that attempts to take up activities from the home and community” (6%).
• “Synonym of a single culture or ethnic” (sic) (6%).

The most frequent response was an understanding of intercultural education as characterized by relationships and exchange. This response was followed in frequency by somewhat disperse ideas.

Some responses were close to the definition of bilingual intercultural education, according to the DGEI, although the elements were mentioned separately (work in the native language, learning based on the surroundings and on the student’s immediate context). Other responses emphasize school or culture, and not education explicitly. Other individuals speak with precision about the education received by indigenous people, teacher exchanges, or intercultural education as a synonym of culture and ethnic groups. A considerable percentage did not respond.

Indigenous teachers’ definitions of intercultural education are heterogeneous: sometimes confusing and vague, other times mistaken, seldom precise or null. In any case, teachers’ interpretations of IE cover a spectrum that is similar, as I hope to prove, to the spectrum derived from institutional definitions (whether bilingual or not).

Some National Materials
Until the mid 1990s, references to intercultural education were marginal in official discourse. In the educational development program (Programa de Desarrollo Educativo—PDE) of 1995-2000, no explicit reference is made to IE, not even with regard to indigenous groups. On the contrary, the “bilingual and bicultural” formula is still used when speaking of commitments “to the indigenous population and to the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity” (SEP-PEF 1996:4). The DGEI, however, had already disposed of this formulation and had adopted intercultural discourse in the early part of the same decade. Neither did the general law of education (Ley General de Educación) or the plans and programs for teacher training in the normal schools make any mention of intercultural proposals (although cultural diversity was mentioned), with the exception of UPN programs directed to indigenous teachers (Jordá, 2003).

I am interested in underlining a characteristic of PDE 1995-2000. The document recognizes the compensatory method for addressing the historical inequalities of indigenous populations. According to the document:

The supply of basic education has not been sufficiently adapted to give a satisfactory response to the demands imposed by the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the disperse rural population, the nation’s diverse indigenous groups and migrant groups (SEP, 1996:40).

Explicit intercultural policies have been promoted in schools since DGEI—in 1990b—egan to address the nation’s ethnic diversity. In other words, interculturality has had indigenous
peoples as subjects of reference, but with the condition that interculturality should be directed to the entire population and not limited to indigenous groups. Although ethnic difference has been the interpretation of interculturality from the official perspective, the PDE 1995-2000 already manifested a double dimension of indigenista policy. On one hand, the side directed to ethnic minorities sought to adapt to the “needs, demands and conditions of culture and language, population, social organization and forms of production and work”; on the other hand, the side directed to the non-indigenous population was interested in “combating the manifest and occult forms of racism, and promoting a fair valuation of the Indian peoples’ contributions to the historical construction of the Nation” (SEP, 1996:47).

One of the DGEI guidelines (1999:11) for the bilingual intercultural education of indigenous boys and girls is the “favoring of their integrated, balanced development as individuals and members of society”. The guidelines explicitly define intercultural education as:

[...] that which recognizes and addresses cultural and linguistic diversity, promotes the respect of differences, aims at forming national unity, based on support for the strengthening of local, regional and national identity, as well as the development of activities and practices that promote liberty and justice for all.

At present, DGEI insists that interculturality must not be assumed to be anchored on the indigenous horizon.

It is more about looking at universality from the indigenous point of view, looking at the unfamiliar from one’s own point of view […], in order to stimulate a critical selection of unknown cultural products and elements that can contribute to enriching and strengthening one’s own viewpoint, and thus allow indigenous students and their families to face current challenges.5

In the late 1990s, another organization that adopted the intercultural discourse was the national council for educational promotion (Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo--CONAFE), through a program for educating migrant children. This organization understands IE as:

[...] education that, by recognizing differences, proposes equal opportunities–o longer in enrollment only but also in academic persistence and success–through respect for the diversity and cultural plurality that affect the members of groups that are discriminated against as well as those who discriminate (CONAFE 1999:66).

The national plan for education (Plan Nacional de Educación—PNE) for 2001-2006 follows more or less the same lines as the previous six-year administration with regard to equality, quality and pertinence. Appearing in this document for the first time is the notion of intercultural education. It is referred to as one of the “challenges for making education a factor of affirmation of national identity, through the construction of a public ethic” (SEP, 2001:45).

In addition, the constitutional modifications of 2001, include the term, intercultural, with reference to indigenous groups. The new Article 2 of the Constitution, paragraph B, fraction two, states that in order to satisfy the needs of indigenous peoples, the authorities
at different levels should “guarantee and increase academic achievement, with preference for bilingual and intercultural education, the teaching of reading and writing, the conclusion of basic education, productive training and higher education”, among other stipulations.

In addition to referring to IE, the PNE introduces terms that had not been previously utilized: multicultural and multiculturality. The suggestion is made that the Mexican nation is a multicultural reality: “It is increasingly accepted that no single Mexican identity, defined as mestizo several years ago, exists. Rather, many regional and ethnic identities exist in the nation” (SEP, 2001:34).

It is admitted that quite often in the educational system, the “recognition of multiculturality is limited to bilingual schools directed to indigenous children, when it should be present in all modes and types. Non-indigenous people especially are those who should value the diversity that sustains our wealth as a nation” (SEP, 2001:63).

In educational terms, according to this document, one of the main challenges is to pass from a multicultural to an intercultural situation by eliminating:

[...] all forms of discrimination, prejudice and racism against the members of different cultures and minorities that share the national territory. It implies the fair participation of all ethnic groups in the economic, social, cultural and political processes of the nation” (SEP, 2001:45).

This idea assumes passing from mere coexistence to the interrelation of equals, with respect and tolerance, plus a valuing of differences.

In spite of the coexistence of official intercultural discourse, the primary focus of plans is to strengthen education for the indigenous population. For this reason, the ministry of education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) proposed six programs in an attempt to comply with the three objectives of bilingual intercultural education: the mastery of national educational content; effective oral and written bilingualism; and recognition and appreciation of one’s own culture (SEP, 2001:133). Of the six programs, only the first three had been implemented by 2002: the program for strengthening bilingual intercultural education (Fortalecimiento de la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe—EIB); the program for the training and professional development of teachers and administrators in bilingual intercultural education (Formación y Desarrollo Profesional de Docentes y Directivos de EIB), and the program for strengthening schools in bilingual intercultural education (Fortalecimiento de las Escuelas de EIB).

The PNE also announced the offering of other services for indigenous populations: secondary education (especially telesecundaria based on intercultural and bilingual perspectives); improvements in initial training for teachers; attention for indigenous students in regular schools, and especially urban schools; and training for heads of household (SEP, 2001:135).

Educational policy related to “intercultural education for all” proposed developing pedagogical focuses for recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools of basic education. Three programs were proposed: curriculum development for basic education, teacher training in intercultural education and values, and encouragement for informal education on the nation’s multiculturality (SEP, 2001:137).

The official perspective has recognized with increasing emphasis that IE becomes concrete at an historically determined time and place. Therefore, IE is a focus that should transcend the field of indigenous education and involve the entire society. Such a
perspective also recognizes, however, that this process has only begun to occur in the national setting (DGEI, 1999; Schmelkes, 2003).

In 2001, the creation of a general coordinating body of bilingual intercultural education (Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe—CGEIB), as part of the SEP, sought to lead the way in broadening the horizon of interculturalism beyond the indigenista slant, although its discourse is still strongly linked to indigenismo. The responsibilities of the CGEIB are to promote: 1) the evaluation of policies in bilingual intercultural education; 2) the participation of federal and municipal entities, as well as various sectors of society, indigenous peoples and communities; and 3) advice on the formulation, implementation and evaluation of innovative EIB programs in curricula that address diversity; the training of teachers, technicians and directors; the development and propagation of native languages; the regional production of materials in indigenous languages; and the completion of educational research (Hernández, 2003).

Points of Convergence and Divergence in Official Perspective. The Case of Baja California: 1996-2001

The state education program (Programa Estatal de Educación—PEE) 1996-2001 of Baja California follows the national guidelines marked in the PDE (1995-2000); in other words, reference is not made to interculturality, but to offering adequate attention to the cultural diversity present in the state. The indigenous and migrant populations have this differentiated profile, with the addition of students with handicaps. Emphasis is placed on respect for cultural diversity as “an indispensable value for the full acceptance of these students” in regular schools (SEBS, s/f:27).

With the swearing in of a substitute governor in Baja California in 1999, due to the sudden death of Héctor Terán, modifications occurred in educational discourse: explicit interest was expressed in developing a “program of intercultural education”. The executive program for the development of education in Baja California (1998-2001), had four goals as priorities: 1) the expansion of coverage to meet demand; 2) educational decentralization to the municipalities to identify, prevent and attend to lagging students; 3) the reduction of deficiencies in adult education; and 4) attention to cultural diversity through a program of intercultural education (SEE, 1998:5).

With regard to IE, it is stated that “Baja California is a concentrated sample of the enormous wealth of the country’s ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity” (SEE, 1998:14). The document adds that because of the state’s geographical location, it is “exposed and open to contact with cultural traditions and practices that go beyond national borders”. Because of the above, the state education system (Sistema Educativo Estatal—SEE) cannot continue to ignore this diversity, and will require the “promotion of critical and reflexive dialogue between the diverse traditions and cultures so that they participate and cooperate, under equal conditions and their own identity, in the construction of state society” (SEE, 1998:14).

The document promotes IE based on “respect for individuals and the knowledge that cultural diversity enriches us all” (SEE, 1998:14). Thus the government would serve “groups with specific needs and characteristics, especially groups enduring social disadvantage and inequality, as in the case of indigenous peoples, peasants and migrants” (SEE, 1998:14-15). Two types of populations are specified that would be served in coordination
with other government organizations, at both the formal and informal levels: “basic adult education and the education of indigenous children” (see, 1998:15).

The previous statement clarifies that state discourse follows the general guidelines of the *indigenista* discourse that prevailed until 2000 in the national setting, with one difference: IE is for groups considered not only different, but also unequal, in a formal as well as informal setting. Therefore, we infer a compensatory focus in the viewpoint of Baja California that is not entirely clear in the national posture.

If we look at the actions originating in the state government, we notice that the governor’s fifth report (1999) makes a reference to IE. In this document, the substitute governor, Alejandro González Alcocer, stated that “intercultural education has represented a great challenge for see. Establishing a single program to address the cultural diversity that is characteristic of our state has been a difficult, complex task.” Two types of education were included in this program: 1) Indigenous and primary education for migrant children; and 2) education for migrants. The governor reported a combination of:

- educational services, educational programs and learning processes that occur in the classroom, with respect for student differences and the differences of individuals with different cultural origins, and the implementation of actions that permit the exchange of cultural knowledge as well as the strengthening of traditions and customs.

The grandiloquent rhetoric of the report is weakened by the specific actions carried out “to strengthen the Intercultural Education Program”: a forum called “Cultural Diversity: Educational Challenge”, in November of 1999, which addressed topics such as the formation of multicultural societies, diversity, bilingualism and interculturality, bilingual education and the influence of the mass media. According to the governor, the forum permitted the participation of 350 individuals, including speakers and attendees from various social sectors, as well as teachers, researchers, government officials and the community in general.

Another action was “the diagnosis of functioning of the different programs that attend to cultural diversity in the entity”. Encouragement was given to “educational research projects related to scholastic diversity, with the purpose of designing a pedagogical model for migrant boys and girls” in conjunction with the national council of science and technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología—CONACYT) through the research system of the Gulf of California (Sistema de Investigación del Mar de Cortés).

Worthy of comment was the forum held in San Quintín, which was more of a political than an academic event. Many participants were unknowledgeable about the meeting’s topics. (I had the opportunity to read a number of speeches.) Most of the attendees were indigenous teachers in basic education, yet also present were well-known specialists from other states (mainly the Federal District), whose references to the local context were tangential or ad hoc.

In the sixth report of Governor González Alcocer, the program for promoting IE was associated with the demand for equal access to, persistence in and completion of basic education. The governor mentioned some of the actions carried out, clearly linked to a strictly *indigenista* posture: the increase from three to six school zones of “indigenous education” o– ne for indigenous groups native to the area and the remaining five for
indigenous groups that have migrated to the area. “All provide services of initial, preschool and primary education” (González A, 2001:118).

From 2001 to Date
After the state elections (marked by low voter turnout and once again won by the candidate for governor from the Partido Acción Nacional political party), a modification occurred in the discourse on IE: it became more ambiguous and opaque. These qualities are seen in the state development plan (Plan Estatal de Desarrollo—PED) for 2002-2007, which makes brief mention of intercultural education as part of the strategic lines of basic education: “developing intercultural and bilingual education in basic education”.

Within the sectorial program for education and integrated training, 2002-2007, the topic of interculturality is taken from the PED. The general objective of the program is: “to attain quality education, with values and centered on students, open to technological progress and social participation”; the document underlines action that will translate into the “strategic line” of interculturality and will be included in the project known as “SEeduca con calidad” (“SEeducates with quality”) (SEE, s/f:30-31).

The separate location of “intercultural and bilingual education” in the “SEeduca con calidad” project, refers more to the ambiguity of its meaning than to a project line dedicated to the quality of education. Due to the omission of a definition for IE, and of specific indicators for its evaluation, it shares the indicators for the rest of the project by dealing with generalities such as: achieving top-five national ranking for Baja California in education, in meeting demand, in the achievement index of skills and knowledge, and in the graduation rate (SEE, s/f:39).

The relevance of interculturalism can be inferred from the first report of Governor Eugenio Elorduy, which ignored the question. No reference was made to the subject until the second report: two lines that stated that “service was provided in intercultural and bilingual education for children in preschool and primary school from the indigenous population living in the entity, mainly in the municipalities of Ensenada and Tijuana”.

Evidence is provided of the state government’s continuing indigenista emphasis, far from the national proposals that refer to intercultural education for all.

More Ruptures and Continuities in Official Discourse
Although official documents give a homogenous vision of government perspective, the presentations of government officials at diverse forums denote a different focus, which shows the more common postures that interact at the various levels of government. We found one example in the topic of IE at the regional forum entitled, “El niño que más te necesita: búsqueda de un modelo de educación básica para los niños y las niñas migrantes del noroeste de México” (“The Child Who Most Needs You: The Search for a Model of Basic Education for Migrant Boys and Girls in Northwest Mexico”).

The discourse of the under secretary of education and social welfare (Subsecretario de Educación y Bienestar Social) of the state of Baja California, Ernesto Castellano Pérez, took data from the document, “Prioridades educativas 1998-2000” to support his arguments. Among other items, Castellano underlined that the society of Baja California was “the result of encounters and conflicts among groups with diverse cultures, which have converged in this border state”; he also spoke of the existence of inter- and intra-ethnic boundaries within the border region as “the existence of diverse cultures (ethnic
groups) in a location and at the same time, the existence of diverse identities within the same ‘national culture’ expressed especially as socioeconomic differences” (SEPyc, 2000:7). Castellano used the term, multicultural, which is referred to marginally in the national and state documents of the time. According to Castellano, from the educational viewpoint of the government of Baja California, “we understand multiculturality not only as ethnic diversity, but also as the diversity of populations with specific characteristics and needs, especially populations that endure situations of inequality and social disadvantage” (SEPyc, 2000:8).

Castellano’s questioning of conceptual discussion, including intercultural education, was contradictory, but recognized that “definitions orient interventions.” Castellano also doubted the effectiveness of the subsystem of indigenous education: “How long will it be valid to sustain indigenous education for … the nation’s ethnic groups?” “How can we imagine an educational program that, in the name of favoring respect for ethnic identity, curtails the possibilities for thousands of girls and boys in our country to become integrated into society?” (SEPyc, 2000:8).

Lastly, Castellano recognized the challenges of properly attending to cultural diversity in Baja California: evaluating programs; establishing guidelines for training specialized personnel; defining strategies for meeting the needs of formal and informal education; generating spaces that permit the interaction of diverse cultures; and designing a program of intercultural education “that allows us to recover, conserve and spread the historical, cultural and educational heritage of our communities” (SEPyc, 2000:8).

Similar to the SEE document, Castellano emphasizes the educational coverage of ethnic differences while indicating the inequalities of certain groups. Yet he constructs a confusing and contradictory version: he understands ethnic group as a synonym of culture, while mixing normative with descriptive questions, and revealing an assimilationist posture in the formulated questions, contrary to official intercultural discourse.

On the other hand, Edith Chavira, the project coordinator for migrant children in the municipality of Ensenada, Baja California, stated that ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity was a characteristic of the Valle de San Quintín, the main receiving center of temporary migrants. Thus Chavira refers to the relevance of the educational model for migrants oriented by an “intercultural focus”, which she conceives as an educational policy, a pedagogical strategy and a methodological focus. Chavira, without mentioning López (1997) in connection with the model of bilingual intercultural education, sustains that interculturality is an “alternative for surpassing homogenizing focuses, and for avoiding the education of citizens based on the exclusion of others and that which is different”; as an educational strategy, “it is a resource for building a significant pedagogy in pluricultural and multilingual societies” (López, 1997:8), and as a methodological focus, it is based on rethinking the relationship among knowledge, language and culture in the classroom in order to consider “values, knowledge, languages and other cultural expressions as resources for transforming teaching practice” (SEPyc, 2000:9-10).

Chavira also sustains that “the intercultural focus is a form of intervention in the multicultural reality that guarantee relations among cultures.” Such a focus should not be “limited to the type of education”. For this reason, Chavira believes that a dimension transversal to education is involved, for students as well as for professors (SEPyc, 2000:10).

Final Considerations
My interest in this reconstruction of the official definitions of intercultural education is to emphasize the lessons learned.

First. According to Muñoz (2002), expressions such as diversity, interculturality and multiculturality conceal great imprecision in terms of scope and theoretical reference. In fact, they create the illusion that we are referring to a well-defined field of problems and methods. Yet such is not the case, especially when we approach the individuals who are assumed to promote or guide teaching work through an intercultural orientation. Therefore, we need to discuss and implement more analytical cycles in order to configure reasonably what we call intercultural education, and in this manner, attempt to act accordingly.

The definitions of intercultural education provided by indigenous teachers result in part from the variety of definitions contained in official documents or perhaps more from immediate experience mixed with an official reference. Both cases have heterogeneity, failures and contradictions that become manifest in the setting of scholastic practices. Our results are preliminary and relative to our sample, but we suspect that in everyday practice, predominant inertia leads to more dramatic situations in which teachers and government officials regularly act in an unconscious manner. These results also allow us to suggest, along with Jordá (2003), that the process of training indigenous teachers with the intercultural focus of the UPN has obtained very little; at the same time, it continues to show difficulties in responding to the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the boys and girls teachers encounter in the classroom.7

Second. In general, from an official perspective, the dominant discourse in IE has been anchored to an indigenista and compensatory vision. As a result, the discourse reproduces underlying inequalities, by sustaining, among other factors, that only “other” ethnic groups need differentiated education. Even worse, in a subtle manner, it continues to comply with the assimilating mission of schools—which tends to homogenize groups still showing cultural differences.

Based on the above, we can infer that the cultural concepts that support most official discourse on IE are debatable, confusing or erroneous. For example, PNE (2001-2006) and Chavira speak of “relations among cultures”. These terms seem to indicate that cultures have a will, as if they were individuals; in fact, categories are used to refer to relationships among “people who have a certain culture”. Another mistake is to establish clear limits between cultures. The most common operation for doing so is to identify culture with ethnic group. A prime example was the report by Ernesto Castellano. This first identification is followed by a second, more complex identification: the equivalency of ethnic groups and cultural plurality (García, Pulido y Montes, 1997:9).

Let us notice, for example, the description of multiculturality in the current PNE: “Recognizing ourselves as a regional and ethnically diverse nation necessarily assumes moving towards a reality in which different cultures can relate to each other as equals” (SEP, 2001:45-46).

From a governmental viewpoint, we encounter the idea of the possibility of clearly indicating where each culture begins and ends, based on an underlying perception of a perfectly delineated mosaic of cultures. Such reductionism, which would clearly equate the concept of culture with group identity,8 often ignores that group identity represents only the points of encounter among group members, the version and the vision that best describe a group in a homogenizing manner. According to García, Pulido and Montes
(1997:10), this posture fails since “analyses of cultural practice show us that identity is shaped, maintained and transformed through countless confrontations and tensions, and that it is constructed primarily versus another identity.”

An undesirable consequence of the above is that the predominant terminology of 20th-century social anthropology seems to persist; in the mid 1960s, there was not only a gradual abandonment of the static, essentialist notion of culture, but also an overcoming of the desire to identify classify and compare discernible elements within an assumed cultural entity (Dietz, 2002:3).

Contemporary social anthropology has leaned toward an unsubstantial conception of culture, explicitly or implicitly conceived as merely a formal mechanism without essence: “an organization of the diversity of individual behaviors” (García García, 1991 in García, Pulido y Montes, 1997:14); or as a process of production, circulation and consumption of symbols and social meanings (García Canclini, 1999:61). Therefore, it is necessary to insist on the concept of culture as something diffuse, unfinished and in constant movement.

Third. The greatest contradictions and ambiguities regarding IE are found in the government of Baja California. After a sudden appearance in a 1998 educational program in terms of ambiguous discourse (an indigenista vision interacting with a concern for unequal groups), and in both cases with a compensatory orientation, IE later transformed into emphatically indigenista actions; more recently, it has occupied an imprecise place in the official viewpoint. As a result, intercultural policies have been linked strongly to the government officials of each local administration, more than to institutional coherence and logic, although the same party (PAN) has retained power.

The Baja California government’s current posture on IE indicates certain retrogression with regard to the immediately preceding administration, which showed a broadening of horizons—though noticeable only in rhetoric and limited actions. The retrogression of official proposals in Baja California can also be seen with regard to the national setting, where more work has been carried out since 2001 in viewing IE as a transversal dimension directed to the entire population and not only to indigenous peoples (Schmelkes, 2003). The distance between state and national postures has become increasingly more evident. While the federal government has shown more consistency in its proposals and a broadening viewpoint, the government of Baja California has manifested confusion and contradictions that imply disconnection with national discourse. However, in both cases, the principal actions have been dominated by the inertia of indigenista proposals.

Fourth. In no summarized case are there references to the dimension of social conflict and the importance of social interests that will have to be overcome to develop effective IE. Comments of an ethical, anthropological or psychosocial nature end up leaving IE in the terrain of “progressive advancement” in the more or less linear development of plural, democratic and open societies. Although reference is made to structural inequalities in the world order and to the “social disadvantages” that affect some cultural minorities, etc., written production (and probably actions) seem to reflect the opinion that adequate teacher training, the correct orientation of the curriculum and a good educational project are sufficient elements for the proposal’s success. Or, if such factors are not considered sufficient, discussions seem to be based on the idea that a “professional” focus could handle the matter. However, in the words of Palidda (1993:34):
Interculturalism can only be the result of a long struggle because, just as in any case of attempted human emancipation, it is a struggle against the forces that base their privileges and power on the criteria of exclusion, the attribution of inferiority and the stigmatization of the oppressed. It is sufficient to consider that democratic and anti-racist conquests are still rarely respected.

Fifth. Following an historical tendency explicitly in favor of the cultural assimilation of ethnic minorities, actions of recognition, at least in the legal field, express a tendency toward the linguistic and cultural pluralism that had been rejected by the political majorities until the end of the 20th century (Díaz-Couder, 1998; Moya, 1998).

Recent intercultural initiatives, mostly symbolic, have been far from adoption in daily practice (Latapi, 2001:44). The so-called call for “bilingual intercultural education” has returned to the old terminology of indigenous education, without substantial change in the classroom. According to Muñoz (2001:cap. 4), present in general is a continuing “prevalence of an irreversible trend towards the dominance of the Spanish language and pedagogical conceptions and practices that are fifty years old”, with greater importance placed on compliance with programs than on student learning.

In spite of favorable efforts in creating a new organization in charge of intercultural education and dedicated to overcoming the indigenista focus, limitations have also become evident. The inclusion of CGEIB in the organizational chart at the federal level—t midterm—is still discussed, and its actions have had “epidermal” effects (diagnosis, information forums, incipient analyses of the normal school curriculum and the preparation of standards for secondary school), distant from the ambitious goals proposed in PNE.

Sixth. Due to the use of other terms associated with interculturality, still pending is an exhaustive analysis of the stratagems, projects and practices that surround IE: multiculturalism, cultural diversity and attention to differences. The course of interculturalism is not clear, but we must recognize that the intercultural tendency has been an influential factor that has accelerated the reformulation of educational policies, although it has tended to focus most on the declarative setting, followed by the differentiated curriculum and teaching training. We agree with authors like Muñoz (2002) and Mena (2002), with regard to the need to promote this project from both the bottom and from the top, from the government and from the community, from nongovernmental organizations and universities, with the goal of constructing democratic and emancipative interculturality.

Notes
1 I thank the journal's anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions for improving this paper. Any remaining errors are mine.
2 I refer to the government perspective as a “material viewpoint” because I assume that most officials share psychological or social postures according to certain expectations and interests; i.e., positions possible to reconstruct in official documents (cf. Pereda, 1994b). I recognize the slant of ignoring the direct opinions of government officials. The variations in discourse I mention, since the presentation of two officials from Baja California at a regional forum in 2000, are data that show part of the heterogeneity of official positions.
3 Completing a bachelor's degree at the UPN is a requirement for indigenous teachers to receive a definitive position in the subsystem, since they are often hired with a high school diploma (bachillerato) and not a normal school diploma like other teachers in basic education. The intercultural focus of the bachelor's program was adopted in early 1990 and taken to the regions of Mexico that requested it, including Baja California.
This question is included in a broader questionnaire on the causes, consequences and alternatives of intercultural education in Tijuana, part of a study I am completing. In this project, I use only the open question regarding the definition of intercultural education.

Electronic version of DGEI at http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb2/sep/sep_4409_anteceendentes. This quote was taken (without credit) from López, 1997.

Carried out in Sinaloa in 2000, with the participation of representatives from the governments of Baja California, Baja California Sur, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Sinaloa and Sonora. Promoted by the ministry of public education and culture (Secretaría de Educación Pública y Cultura) of the state of Sinaloa, the normal school (Escuela Normal) of Sinaloa and CONACET. Attended by Spanish, U.S. and Mexican academics.

Some of the problems detected in the bachelor's degrees at UPN are: semi-scholastic education, which assumes self-teaching that is difficult to implement, given the limited functionality of written language and the low academic level of most indigenous teachers; excessive theorizing in curriculum content, which produces alienation from technical sources and conceptual reflections, and lack of articulation with other training programs offered by other institutions (Muñoz, 2001:476; SEP, 2003:56).

"It cannot be denied that the members of a cultural group may, and actually do have, an identity; but we believe it impoverishes the meaning and reality of culture for a group's culture to be reduced to its identity." (García, Pulido y Montes, 1997:9).

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Article received: August 11, 2003
Accepted: March 24, 2004