

# Interculturality in Chilean Indigenous Education: between recognition and recoloniality

## A Interculturalidade na Educação Indígena Chilena: uma revisão sob a perspectiva crítica

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**HOW TO CITE:** PIRES, A.; MERCADO, G. C. Interculturality in Chilean Indigenous Education: between recognition and recoloniality. *Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação*, Araraquara, v. 21, e20392, 2021. e-ISSN: 1982-5587. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21723/riaee.v21i00.2039202>

### Abstract

This article aims to examine how intercultural education is implemented in the Chilean educational system, to assess its advances, challenges, and possibilities. To this end, a bibliographic review of scientific articles on the subject and the historical trajectory of this education within the Chilean context was conducted in the SciELO and Google Scholar repositories, as well as in UNESCO publications, articles on Chilean government websites, online newspapers, and at universities. The text aims to reflect on the functioning of this intercultural education in the Chilean educational system, focusing on higher education, through a critical analysis. Thus, it is clear that, despite some initiatives to make interculturality more present, several barriers still hinder the process of establishing intercultural education.

**Keywords:** education; interculturality; higher education; indigenous population; Chile.

### Resumo

O presente trabalho visa compreender como ocorre a educação intercultural no sistema educacional do Chile, para compreender seus avanços, desafios e possibilidades. Para isso, foi realizada uma revisão bibliográfica de artigos científicos acerca do tema e da trajetória histórica dessa educação dentro do contexto chileno no repositório da SciELO e do Google Acadêmico, bem como em trabalhos da UNESCO, em matérias de sites do governo chileno, jornais *online* e em universidades. O texto objetiva trazer uma reflexão sobre o funcionamento dessa educação intercultural no sistema educacional chileno, com foco no Ensino Superior, através de uma análise crítica. Assim, percebe-se que, apesar de haver algumas iniciativas para que a interculturalidade se faça presente, ainda existem diversas barreiras que dificultam o processo para que uma educação intercultural se instale.

**Palavras-chave:** educação; interculturalidade; ensino superior; população indígena; Chile.

### INTRODUCTION

According to the 2024 census conducted by Chile's National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas - INE), more than two million people identify as belonging to an indigenous group, accounting for 12.8% of the population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2025). Of those, 1.7 million identify as Mapuche, 156,000 as Aymara, and 88,000 as Diaguita. These three groups constitute the largest indigenous populations in Chile (Marca Chile, 2024). Throughout history, these people have faced marginalization and exclusion, often rendered invisible by governments. However, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asserts that it is the state's responsibility to preserve and strengthen the languages and cultures of these peoples (Schmelkes; Ballesteros, 2020).

Causes championed by indigenous peoples began to gain visibility in Chile about 30 years ago, a relatively recent development in the country's history. A significant milestone in this regard was the enactment of the "Indigenous Law" (Law 19,253) in 1993. Despite some controversies stemming from a lack of representation, indigenous peoples were consulted. They participated in drafting the law, which was the first to address recognizing this segment of the population.

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**Submitted:** June 27, 2025

**Reviewed:** March 04, 2026

**Approved:** March 04, 2026

**Financial support:** Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (process 407847/2023-5).

**Conflicts of interest:**

There are no conflicts of interest.

**Ethics committee approval:**

Not applicable.

**Data availability:** Not applicable.

Study conducted at Universidade de Sorocaba (Uniso), Sorocaba, SP, Brasil.



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Inspired by the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, this law addresses the rights of indigenous peoples (Agência Nacional de Transportes Terrestres, 2021). The declaration defines these peoples and affirms governments' obligation to recognize and protect their social, cultural, spiritual, and religious practices and values (Guzmán, 2013; Agência Nacional de Transportes Terrestres, 2021).

As early as the 1990s, the Chilean government launched pilot programs for intercultural bilingual education (Educação Bilingue Intercultural - EIB) in regions with high concentrations of indigenous populations. These programs aimed to incorporate indigenous languages and cultures into school curricula to promote education that respects the cultural identity of all students (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016). Despite having been public policy for nearly three decades, many barriers still hinder the effective integration of EIB and intercultural education into the country's education system (Loncón, 2021). Furthermore, Silva and Azevedo (2004) warn that teaching indigenous languages in bilingual schools as it is currently done has become a means of "domesticating" these peoples rather than helping them value and accept their own culture. The issue is no longer denying indigenous populations the right to express themselves in their own languages, but rather imposing the duty to adopt externally developed orthographic norms and systems that do not work well. In this context, indigenous languages serve as a means of "educating" these peoples in line with "civilized" values and concepts (Silva; Azevedo, 2004, p. 151).

This article aims to address intercultural education in Chile by providing a brief historical analysis of its development and the challenges it faces in the country. The study also explores intercultural education within Chilean universities and its impact on Indigenous students. Finally, the article offers considerations on the potential and challenges of implementing a program based on critical interculturality. First, however, we will begin with the theoretical foundation of this analysis.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of interculturality has been widely discussed in education and the social sciences, where it takes on different meanings depending on the theoretical framework and context. This section presents the key concepts underlying the proposed analysis, emphasizing authors who discuss critical interculturality from a decolonial perspective. Before delving deeper into critical interculturality, however, it is important to clarify the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality.

According to Catherine Walsh (2012), multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of different cultures within the same social space. However, despite recognizing the existence of different cultures, multiculturalism does not question the power relations established between them. Thus, the state often adopts the logic of multiculturalism as a policy of superficial tolerance rather than structural transformation, because it acknowledges differences while maintaining the power hierarchies of the dominant culture over the subordinate culture, thereby reinforcing the established colonial structure. Consequently, these policies result in the symbolic recolonization of cultural differences, becoming tools of control.

In its broadest sense, interculturality can be defined as the interaction, encounter, and/or relationship between cultures. In other words, it concerns the confrontation and intertwining of cultural groups that come into contact and engage in exchanges (Weissmann, 2018; Canclini, 2004 *apud* Weissmann, 2018). However, mere contact between cultures does not guarantee genuine dialog or social justice. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of interculturality (Walsh, 2016; Silva et al., 2022).

The first is relational interculturality, which refers to interculturality as merely the coexistence or contact between two distinct cultures. It is characterized by an emphasis on dialog between cultures, the promotion of social spaces where such dialog can take place (e.g., schools, workplaces, and communities), and the recognition of cultural diversity. However, relational interculturality does not problematize existing power relations or question colonial logic.

Therefore, it is merely a descriptive form of interculturality that is politically naïve and often approaches multiculturalism (Walsh, 2012, 2016).

Closer to this idea is functional, or instrumental, interculturality. As its name suggests, it is often promoted by states and public policies in a depoliticized manner and integrated into multiculturalist thinking. The aim is to serve the dominant system. It also recognizes diversity and promotes tolerance without questioning inequalities or seeking real structural transformation (Walsh, 2016).

In the Latin American context, such policies seek to include Indigenous cultures in society in a folkloric manner through festivals, clothing, and commemorative dates. However, these policies maintain colonial hierarchies of power and knowledge. According to Silva et al. (2022), this type of interculturality serves the government and does not seek changes in the system; it is often associated with colonial logic. Consequently, educational policies that claim to be intercultural remain rooted in Eurocentric logic, keeping indigenous knowledge subordinate to Western European knowledge.

On the other hand, critical interculturality arises from the struggles of Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples. According to Walsh (2012), it becomes a strategy of resistance against social injustices stemming from colonial logic. Critical interculturality is therefore presented as a political, social, pedagogical, epistemological, and decolonial project. It questions existing power relations, confronts the coloniality of knowledge, and seeks to value Indigenous and Afro-descendant knowledge. It also promotes horizontal dialogs between knowledge systems and brings about real social transformation.

Keeping this in mind, Walsh (2016, p. 16) presents critical interculturality as an important tool for confronting “recoloniality”. According to her,

While the modernity-coloniality dyad historically operated through patterns of power rooted in exclusion, denial, subordination, and control within the capitalist system/world, today it hides behind a (neo)liberal-multiculturalist discourse. In this way, it suggests that, with the recognition of diversity and the promotion of its inclusion, the former hegemonic project has dissolved. However, rather than fading away, the coloniality of power in recent years has been undergoing a process of realignment within global designs linked to neoliberalization projects and market needs; this is “recoloniality”.

Today, coloniality not only persists but also constantly renews itself in new forms. It manifests through standardized public and educational policies, universal assessments, and discourses of inclusion that do not transform structures or truly include anyone. Thus, while recoloniality may appear inclusive, it perpetuates domination and the colonial structure (Walsh, 2016).

The concept of interculturality is complex because it is not linear, but rather involves conflicts, contradictions, symbolic disputes, and power relations. In other words, various forms of interculturality coexist, but not all lead to emancipation. For interculturality to be transformative, it must recognize existing tensions, resistances, and social conflicts. It must also examine historical contexts marked by coloniality that affect societal structures (Messias, 2024). Therefore, this study is grounded in the concept of critical interculturality for its discussions, analyses, and reflections. As will be seen in the following sections, the study questions the coloniality of knowledge present in Chile’s intercultural education policies.

## **METHOD**

For this study, a narrative literature review was conducted. This type of review is characterized by not relying on a single method to search for and select literature. This type of review allows for the use of various sources of information, such as scientific articles, books, and other relevant materials. The main objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic under investigation to enable the contextualization and discussion of the main results reported in the literature (Cavalcante; Oliveira, 2020).

This review relied on scientific articles from the Scielo repository, Google Scholar, and works from institutions such as the National Superintendence of Higher University Education (Superintendência Nacional de Educação Superior Universitária - SUNEDU), the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), among others, during August, September, and October of 2024. This research is part of a larger project aimed at exploring higher education policies in Latin America. Thus, the review mapped existing policies focused on intercultural education in the selected country.

The search terms used were "intercultural education," "higher education," "indigenous education," "intercultural policies," "Latin America," and "Chile". A total of 73 studies addressing these issues were identified. After reviewing the abstracts, materials that did not address intercultural education or educational policies in Chile or that were published more than 30 years ago were discarded. Twenty-two publications that met the established criteria were selected and are listed in Appendix 1. Nineteen of the 22 selected studies were used to prepare this article.

## **EIB EDUCATION AND ITS CHALLENGES**

An analysis of Chile's historical and political context reveals that the country has undergone three main phases of political, economic, and ideological transformation. The government of Salvador Allende, the leader of the left-wing Chilean political alliance Popular Unity, marked the pre-dictatorship period. During his administration (1970–1973), Allende sought to achieve a peaceful transition to socialism through democratic participation and institutional reforms. His government promoted the nationalization of industries and accelerated agrarian reform to reduce socioeconomic inequalities. However, he ultimately faced opposition and challenges from more conservative groups, leading to his ouster in the 1973 military coup led by Augusto Pinochet (Borges, 2014).

From that point on, the country embarked on a radical process of reforms and changes to the Chilean political structure. Education was one of the sectors most affected by a liberal market logic, decentralization, and the reduction of the state. The government encouraged privatization and the liberalization of the educational system with minimal regulation. Education came to be viewed through a business lens with a focus on the competitiveness and growth of private institutions (Brunner; Alarcón, 2023).

Following the end of the dictatorship in 1990, the government did not entirely abandon this model of commodification. Instead, there were gradual adjustments that sought to balance market freedom with public regulation and social protection. The private education sector continued to grow, becoming dominant in terms of the number of institutions. Meanwhile, the state began to indirectly regain control through regulation, the creation of agencies, accreditation systems, and new legislation. Examples include the National Education Council and the Superintendency of Higher Education (Brunner; Alarcón, 2023). It is important to note that the institutionalization of EIB in the country took place within this historical and political context of transition from military dictatorship to democratization. Thus, various centrist and center-left parties united in a political alliance to take control of the government during this transition. However, educational policies during this period were marked by tensions between neoliberal and social visions. This resulted in a predominance of the neoliberal perspective, which continued to influence Chilean policy until recently (Díaz; Castro-Paredes; Davis-Toledo, 2010).

In 2022, President Gabriel Boric attempted to implement a new constitution that aimed to reflect cultural diversity and recognize the rights of indigenous peoples. Drafted with the active participation of indigenous community representatives, it aimed to promote a plurinational state. However, the proposal was rejected due to the government's low approval rating and because 61.86% of voters rejected it in a September referendum (Gazeta do Povo, 2022).

**Table 1.** Timeline of key milestones in intercultural education and education for indigenous peoples in Chile.

Year	Event
1973	Military coup in Chile – the beginning of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship; a government characterized by neoliberal policies and the commodification of education.
1989	Adoption of ILO Convention No. 169, which recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples and is subsequently referenced in Chile’s Indigenous Peoples Act.
1990	The end of the military dictatorship in Chile and the beginning of the transition to democracy; the start of the institutionalization of Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE).
1993	Enactment of the Indigenous Peoples Act (Law No. 19,253), which recognizes Chile’s indigenous peoples and provides for their participation in the drafting process.
1996	Launch of EIB pilot programs to promote the teaching of indigenous languages in Chilean schools located in areas with a significant indigenous population.
2022	A proposal for a new constitution drafted with indigenous participation was rejected in a referendum, with 61.86% of the votes against it.
2024	Marca Chile (2024) and Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2025) have updated census data, indicating that 11.5% of the Chilean population identifies as indigenous, with the Mapuche, Aymara, and Diaguita peoples being the most numerous.

**Source:** Prepared by the authors, 2025.

Some reasons for rejecting the new constitutional proposal include the perception that the text was lengthy and radical. This raised fears about the implementation of structural changes and was fueled by fake news, such as claims that the new constitution would allow abortion after the third month of pregnancy and abolish private property (Colombo, 2022). These claims caused a strong backlash among the Chilean population, resulting in the referendum’s defeat. Consequently, no structural changes were implemented within the EIB, and historical challenges related to the recognition and effective participation of indigenous peoples in the development of educational policies persist (Table 1).

Let’s see how the Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) defines interculturalism:

Interculturality recognizes epistemic diversity—that is, the value of the existence and construction of diverse forms of knowledge—while avoiding bias and the superiority of one worldview over another. To this end, symmetrical dialogue is possible by recognizing and valuing the richness of linguistic, cultural, territorial, and spiritual diversity (Chile, 2022, p. 3)<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, an education grounded in the principles of critical interculturalism must transcend traditional models and Eurocentric, colonial perspectives. This allows for the recognition and appreciation of diverse knowledge and cultures (Walsh, 2016; Guzmán, 2013). Keeping this in mind, the Chilean government launched the EIB in the 1990s. This program remains part of the state’s educational system to this day.

The project aims to promote the cultural recognition of indigenous peoples through bilingual education to reverse historical “Castilianization” (Chile, 2022). Teaching one of the indigenous languages, usually Mapudungun, would strengthen and preserve the identity of indigenous students, enabling them to participate in society without abandoning their mother tongue (Chile, 2022).

However, an analysis of EIB education reveals that many challenges remain. The selected bibliographic works mention several problems, including a lack of adequate resources, insufficient training for qualified professors to teach EIB, and inadequate didactic materials that reinforce prejudices. These issues lead to pedagogical practices that do not align with indigenous traditions and values (Guzmán, 2013; Ibáñez-Salgado; Druker-Ibáñez, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Our own translation.

<sup>2</sup> The historical, political, and cultural process of imposing the Spanish language (Castilian) on other peoples and languages—especially indigenous languages—with the aim of linguistically unifying a territory, facilitating political and administrative control, and reinforcing cultural domination.

This occurs because educational policies involving the Intercultural Bilingual Education Program (PEIB) often fail to consider the cultural specificities of indigenous communities. Furthermore, indigenous peoples' participation in the formulation and implementation of EIB policies is insufficient, resulting in programs that fail to meet their educational and cultural expectations and needs (Ibáñez-Salgado; Druker-Ibáñez, 2018).

As noted earlier, there is a divergence between the state's vision of interculturality and the demands of indigenous communities. The state seeks to integrate indigenous cultures into a homogeneous national model, aiming to include indigenous peoples within the dominant social structure, guided by the logic of functional interculturality. Consequently, public policies are promoted that, while acknowledging cultural diversity, ultimately assimilate indigenous knowledge and practices into existing mainstream cultural norms. Conversely, indigenous peoples demand an interculturality that recognizes and values their cultures, languages, and identities as autonomous entities. They seek legal recognition of their rights and active participation in the formulation and implementation of policies that affect their lives (Guzmán, 2013). According to Montecinos (2004, p. 34 *apud* Guzmán, 2013), "EIB policy remains silent in the face of the social processes of exclusion and discrimination that shape the social construction of the indigenous person and the indigenous being" in the country.

The state tends to take a unilateral approach, implementing top-down policies without properly consulting Indigenous peoples on issues that concern them. Consequently, many educational programs fail to reflect the specific realities and needs of Indigenous peoples. This results in education that, though labeled "intercultural," does not foster dialog between cultures. For example, the visual arts education program in the Araucaiana region maintains a monocultural approach, which marginalizes indigenous artistic expressions. Similarly, social-emotional learning programs in Mapuche communities do not always consider the cultural specificities of students from these communities (Paz-Mardones et al., 2022; Rubilar; Cachón; Castro, 2023). As can be seen, the interculturality promoted by the state often remains limited to a superficial treatment of indigenous culture (Guzmán, 2013).

Another issue is that most policies on this subject focus solely on rural populations, overlooking urban Indigenous peoples. This means the diversity and mobility of Indigenous communities are not considered, despite the growing number of Indigenous people living in urban areas. This rural focus perpetuates and reinforces stereotypes and obscures the realities and demands of Indigenous people in cities. These individuals face significant challenges in preserving their languages, cultures, and identities (Ibarra; Calderón, 2016). In their article, the authors highlight that the lack of spaces for the daily use of Indigenous languages, as well as the predominance of Spanish in cities, are factors that make preserving Indigenous languages in urban environments more difficult. Furthermore, living in cities often distances new generations of Indigenous people from their traditional communities, leading to a weakening of their cultural practices. The absence of public policies for intercultural education exacerbates all of this.

There is also a shortage of qualified professors. Many professors lack the training to address issues involving the cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous communities. Additionally, there is significant difficulty in hiring Indigenous professors to serve as cultural and linguistic mediators due to insufficient incentives in public policy and the low professional recognition of these roles. This creates a significant barrier for Indigenous people entering the teaching profession (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016, 2016).

This results in resistance among educational institutions to the widespread use of Indigenous languages in formal education, as outlined in the EIB. This hinders the creation of appropriate didactic materials and ensures education remains heavily focused on colonial and racist content, sustaining and fueling Eurocentric views.

In this sense, the explicit function of the teaching guides in the indigenous language sector is to serve as a formal tool that transmits knowledge through Western logic, offering fragmented knowledge in which only those elements deemed convenient by the State are highlighted and presented as official and legitimate to society at large.

From this perspective, it follows that the pedagogical guides in the indigenous language sector are imbued with ambiguous and pragmatic vocabulary, using a lexicon that belittles the indigenous subject as someone who “does not know,” “does not master,” and “is not familiar with” (Arias-Ortega; Riquelme Bravo, 2019, p. 186)<sup>3</sup>.

As a result, discriminatory attitudes that devalue Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge persist. Examples include the belittling of Indigenous knowledge compared to Eurocentric and colonial “traditional” knowledge in classrooms and the superficial treatment of Indigenous cultures (Arias-Ortega; Riquelme Bravo, 2019).

In this context, Indigenous languages are taught more as cultural elements than as real tools for communication and knowledge, thereby reducing their practical functionality. These languages are taught only in limited ways, often as supplementary subjects rather than as a medium of instruction. According to Loncón (2021), the EIB program provides two hours of indigenous language instruction per week in schools where the “Indigenous Language” subject is integrated into the curriculum; the rest of the curriculum is taught in Spanish. According to the PEIB (Chile, 2018), this subject is only integrated into the curriculum in schools where 20% or more of the students are of Indigenous descent. Decree 280 states that the inclusion of indigenous language instruction is optional and depends on each educational institution’s interest in promoting interculturality. Furthermore, parents or guardians must express their desire in writing for their children to participate in these classes at the time of enrollment (Fuentealba et al., 2021).

Thus, Spanish remains dominant in schools, marginalizing indigenous languages and giving them a secondary, less prestigious status. This reinforces the idea that indigenous culture is inferior to the colonizer’s (Guzmán, 2013; Ibarra; Calderón, 2016). Arias-Ortega and Quintriqueo (2021) argue that there is an epistemological tension in the implementation of the EIB because of the colonial educational relationship between mentor professors and traditional indigenous educators.

In this relationship, the mentor professor often brings a Eurocentric perspective and frequently marginalizes Indigenous knowledge. This results in an educational practice that marginalizes these two figures and reinforces the power asymmetry between them. The predominance of a school model that does not fully recognize or validate Indigenous culture and language exacerbates the difficulty of effectively implementing EIB (Arias-Ortega; Quintriqueo, 2021). Although indigenous students have gained some access to and retention in the educational system, this is due to general changes within the system, not specific policies directed at indigenous peoples (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016).

Considering this scenario, Walsh’s (2016) arguments are worth revisiting. He describes modern coloniality as once being founded on patterns of exclusion, subordination, and denial, but now hiding behind a neoliberal multiculturalist discourse. This line of thought suggests that the former hegemonic model has dissolved through the recognition of diversity and the promotion of inclusion (which, in reality, is often merely integration). However, in recent years, the coloniality of power has merely adjusted itself in accordance with neoliberal projects driven by market needs—a process the author terms “recoloniality”.

Thus, contemporary global capitalism employs a multicultural logic that “incorporates difference to the extent that it neutralizes and empties it of its effective meaning” (Zizek, 1998 *apud* Walsh, 2016, p. 16). Consequently, the recognition and respect for cultural diversity becomes a new strategy of power domination that perpetuates colonial thinking through multicultural discourse. The Chilean state uses EIB based on the idea of functional interculturality as a tool of social control over Indigenous peoples. This is because it seeks to maintain existing power structures, does not meet these people’s demands for respect, recognition, and appreciation, and follows the logic of recoloniality (Guzmán, 2013; Walsh, 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> Own translation.

## INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Chilean higher education is divided into three types of institutions: universities, professional institutes (PI), and technical training centers (TTC). An increase in the number of indigenous students enrolling in higher education is evident when analyzing the data over the years: in 2017, indigenous enrollments accounted for 6.59% of the total, while in 2019, that figure rose to 8.4% (Universidad de Chile, 2025). In 2024, the total number of higher education enrollments in Chile was 1,385,828. Of this total, 150,953 were indigenous, accounting for 10.89%. Of these enrollments, 96.4% (145,547) were for undergraduate programs, 1.9% (2,820) were for master's programs, and 1.7% (2,586) were for doctoral programs. Of these enrollments, 81,168 (53.8% of the total) were at universities, while the remainder were at IPs and CFTs (Chile, 2024)<sup>4</sup>.

Although Indigenous students are increasingly present in university settings, EIB has not been significantly incorporated into university curricula. Since its implementation, EIB has primarily been applied to elementary and secondary education. However, there is no mention of higher education in the related decrees (Poblete, 2019). This is due to a lack of guidelines and specific programs that integrate interculturality into university-level academic curricula and promote EIB (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016). The university educational model remains homogenizing and insensitive to the country's cultural and linguistic diversity, creating epistemological challenges for integrating and valorizing Indigenous knowledge in academic curricula. Thus, universities continue to operate based on Western, colonialist, and Eurocentric worldviews and paradigms, which reinforce the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and languages (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016; Poblete, 2019).

Unlike what occurs in other Latin American countries that have implemented bilingual education initiatives in higher education, such as, the Peruvian government's initiative to create bilingual universities that offer courses in indigenous languages and encourage academic research in languages spoken by indigenous peoples, such as the Universidade Nacional Intercultural da Amazônia, a Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Peru e o Centro de Idiomas da Universidade Nacional da Amazônia Peruana (Espinosa, 2017; Rodríguez González, 2019; Peru, 2024; PUC News, 2025; Universidad Nacional de la Amazonía Peruana, 2025), Chilean universities do not offer courses in indigenous languages nor promote academic research in the languages of indigenous peoples<sup>5</sup>.

The situation is even more dire in higher education than in basic education, where there is no teacher training program for EIB instruction. Initiatives related to the teaching of indigenous languages are far scarcer and more limited in higher education. This reinforces the linguistic hierarchy of Spanish over indigenous languages and conveys the idea that Spanish is the only legitimate language for producing and disseminating knowledge in higher education (Poblete, 2019).

Poblete (2019) also notes that although the enrollment of Indigenous students in universities has increased, there is no well developed national public policy that promotes their access to and retention in the university environment. The absence of institutional support, such as scholarship programs, materials adapted to indigenous needs, and academic mentoring, contributes to the underrepresentation of indigenous students in this academic environment. As we have seen, although 12.8% of Chile's population identifies as indigenous, only 10% of this group is enrolled in higher education. There is no meaningful connection between universities and indigenous communities, which hinders the collaborative development of educational programs that effectively reflect cultural diversity (Figueiroa; Leyton, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> In Brazil, the number of indigenous university students enrolled was approximately 46,000, according to the latest census conducted in 2021, which corresponds to 0.5% of the total number of students enrolled in higher education that same year (Educa Mais Brasil, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Several Brazilian universities have sought to implement intercultural education policies and already offer courses aimed at training and developing intercultural professionals. Some examples include the Intercultural Training for Indigenous Educators course at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, the Indigenous Intercultural Education degree program at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, and the Indigenous Intercultural Pedagogy and Indigenous Intercultural Education degree programs at the State University of Mato Grosso (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2025; Mato Grosso, 2021; Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2024).

This lack of integration and intercultural implementation limits dialog between traditional indigenous knowledge and academic scholarship. This results in the devaluation of students from indigenous communities' knowledge and creates a scenario of unequal opportunities for them. Without inclusion policies, Indigenous students face many structural barriers that hinder their academic education and perpetuate historical inequalities (Poblete, 2019).

The absence of content reflecting and recognizing Indigenous culture and knowledge in academic curricula, coupled with prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes among peers and professors, often makes universities hostile environments for Indigenous students (Ortiz-Velosa; Arias-Ortega, 2019). A study by Segovia González and Flanagan-Bórquez (2019) that interviewed Indigenous students at Chilean universities found that many feel their identities are not recognized, resulting in a sense of invisibility. The students reported challenges adapting to the academic environment due to cultural differences and a lack of institutional support. Professors' lack of recognition of the cultural specificities and needs of these students also hinders the creation of an inclusive environment (Segovia González; Flanagan-Bórquez, 2019).

The institution's lack of understanding and appreciation of indigenous cultures often results in inadequate educational practices that fail to meet these students' specific needs. This can lead to demotivation, feelings of alienation, and loneliness. These factors contribute to higher dropout rates and poorer academic performance among indigenous students (Ortiz-Velosa; Arias-Ortega, 2019).

According to a study by Segovia-González and Flanagan-Bórquez (2019), indigenous Chilean students exhibit lower educational indicators than non-indigenous students, including higher illiteracy rates and lower educational attainment, highlighting educational inequality in Chile. The study identifies several contributing factors, including low economic capital, which hinders access to educational materials and learning opportunities, and the existing language barrier, which contributes to a sense of exclusion and cultural devaluation among indigenous students. The article notes that many indigenous students grow up in bilingual or multilingual environments where their native languages coexist with or compete with Spanish. Thus, when they enter the university environment, they encounter a predominantly monolingual, Westernized academic context that creates communicative and symbolic barriers. Even when students speak Spanish, they may not know or master academic language and cultural norms, which can undermine their self-confidence and academic performance. The lack of linguistic support from universities exacerbates this situation further (Segovia González; Flanagan-Bórquez, 2019).

The absence of EIB in higher education in Chile highlights a structural deficit in educational policies that need to be reformulated to ensure the recognition and appreciation of Indigenous cultures in all aspects of formal education (Poblete, 2019). It is important to remember that critical interculturality involves a process of knowledge, appreciation, visibility, and respect for diversity and the cultural identities involved. This creates spaces for egalitarian dialog about different perspectives on the world, life, and knowledge (Universidad de Chile, 2025).

A higher education system must be built that bridges the gaps and breaks down the barriers of cultural prejudice and marginalization that still exist in this environment. This will strengthen dialogs between indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge and make critical interculturality a reality within Chilean universities. As Julca Guerrero et al. (2023) have demonstrated, this requires reformulating, recreating, and transforming the university environment to make it more inclusive.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this article is to analyze intercultural education in Chile, particularly in higher education. Despite the Chilean government's initiative to implement EIB as a public education policy, it falls far short of what critical interculturality—our frame of reference in this article—advocates. Instead of promoting an appreciation of indigenous cultures and

knowledge, EIB often limits itself to superficial aspects, such as teaching native languages for a few hours a week. Thus, a potential path toward strengthening indigenous identities often merely serves as a tool for integration into the dominant system rather than as genuine recognition of diversity.

The limitations of EIB in Chilean higher education stem from several factors: the predominant focus on elementary education; the lack of training and professional development for professors; the absence of public institutional policies targeting Indigenous students; and the disconnect between educational institutions and Indigenous communities. Thus, the existing gap becomes more evident. The lack of support programs and policies aimed at specialized teacher training reinforces an exclusionary and Eurocentric model with little connection to the reality of many Indigenous students.

Therefore, it is crucial to reform certain aspects of the EIB to ensure the inclusion and valuation of indigenous knowledge within the academic environment. The EIB must expand to include higher education, incorporating interculturality into Chilean universities and implementing effective support programs for indigenous students. Continuing training programs are also necessary to enable non-indigenous professors to incorporate intercultural practices into the education system at all levels. Additionally, programs that encourage and facilitate cultural mediation by indigenous professors are important. It is important to emphasize that the exclusion of indigenous peoples from higher education does not begin within universities but rather at the beginning of basic education and becomes more pronounced as students approach tertiary education.

The issue is not merely “including” these students in the system but rethinking the system itself. We must transform the logic of education to recognize, respect, and legitimately integrate diverse epistemologies and worldviews into curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional structures. To make intercultural education possible, we must identify the barriers that exclude and silence these people’s voices. However, we must also recognize the existing strengths, such as ancestral knowledge, local experiences, Indigenous professors, and students who resist exclusion and build bridges every day, both inside and outside the classroom.

Unfortunately, the reality of barriers preventing a truly intercultural education from taking place is not unique to Chile. Other Latin American countries, such as Peru and Brazil, face similar challenges stemming from the historical oppression and exclusion of Indigenous peoples by European colonizers, which persists to this day. Therefore, new studies and research are important to foster greater understanding, deeper insight, and increased visibility of this issue. This will help establish a truly intercultural reality across diverse sectors and contexts in Latin America.

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**Authors contribution**

AP: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. GCM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. José Luís Bizelli

## Appendix 1. List of publications selected for the study, by year and as cited in the article

Author (Year)	Title of the production	Journal title	It was used in the article
Arias-Ortega e Riquelme Bravo (2019)	(Des) encuentros en la Educación Intercultural en Contexto Mapuche, Chile	Revista de estudios y experiencias en educación	Yes
Arias-Ortega e Quintriqueo (2021)	Tensiones epistemológicas en la implementación de la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe	Ensaio: Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação	Yes
Brunner e Alarcón (2023)	Evolução do ensino superior chileno a partir de uma perspectiva equalizadora de governança	Education Policy Analysis Archives	Yes
Candau and Russo (2010)	Interculturalidade e educação na América Latina: uma construção plural, original e complexa	Revista Diálogo Educacional	No
Corbetta (2018)	Educación intercultural bilingüe y enfoque de interculturalidad en los sistemas educativos latinoamericanos: Avances y desafíos	CEPAL	No
Figueiroa e Leyton (2016)	Educação intercultural bilíngue no Chile	Revista Brasileira de História da Educação	Yes
Fuentealba et al. (2021)	La Enseñanza de Lenguas en Chile: Una Mirada desde la Planificación y Política Lingüística	Estudios filológicos	Yes
Gajardo-Carvajal and Mondaca-Rojas (2020)	Oralidad andina y educación intercultural en zona de frontera, norte de Chile	Interciência	No
Guzmán (2013)	Interculturalidade em questão: análise crítica a partir do caso da Educação Intercultural Bilingue no Chile	Revista Pedagógica	Yes
Ibáñez-Salgado e Druker-Ibáñez (2018)	La educación intercultural en Chile desde la perspectiva de los actores: una co-construcción	Revista de Ciencias Sociales	Yes
Ibarra e Calderón (2016)	Educação intercultural bilíngue no Chile	Revista Brasileira de História da Educação	Yes
Messias (2024)	Interculturalidade complexa: uma proposta de reflexão	Educação & Linguagem	Yes
Ortiz-Velosa e Arias-Ortega (2019)	Ser mapuche en la universidad: Condiciones de ingreso a la formación inicial docente, La Araucanía	Educare	Yes
Paz-Mardones et al. (2022)	Educação monocultural no ensino de artes visuais em contextos de diversidade cultural no Chile: uma visão crítica da região da Araucanía	Revista Electrónica Educare	Yes
Poblete (2019)	Educação Intercultural Bilíngue no Chile: definições e breve recuento histórico desde a década de 1990	Biblioteca do Congresso Nacional do Chile	Yes
Repetto (2020)	O conceito de interculturalidade: trajetórias e conflitos desde américa latina	Textos e Debates	No
Rubilar, Cachón e Castro (2023)	Impacto de um programa de aprendizagem socioemocional na autoestima de estudantes pertencentes às comunidades educativas interculturais Mapuches na região de Araucanía-Chile	Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação	Yes
Segovia Gonzalez e Flanagan-Borquez (2019)	Desafíos de ser un estudiante indígena de primera generación en la universidad chilena de hoy	RMIE	Yes
Fuentes Vilugrón and Arriagada Hernández (2020)	La educación intercultural en Chile analizada desde la teoría de la complejidad	IE Revista de Investigación Educativa de la REDIECH	No
Walsh (2012)	Interculturalidad y (de)colonialidad: Perspectivas críticas y políticas	Visão Global	Yes
Walsh (2016)	Interculturalidade crítica e pedagogia decolonial: in-surgir, re-existir e re-viver	Educação intercultural na América Latina: entre concepções, tensões e propostas	Yes
Weissmann (2018)	Multiculturalidade, transculturalidade, interculturalidade	Construção psicopedagógica	Yes