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## UNICEF EDUCATION

### Education Case Study

## BOLIVIA

### Native language education paves the way for preschool readiness

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Bolivia is home to 36 indigenous peoples, each with its own language. Despite the [Education Law](#) which requires that education be intracultural, intercultural and multilingual, around 30 native languages in the country are in danger of extinction due to the lack of practice, appreciation and transmission. In response, UNICEF has been supporting the Ministry of Education and the Plurinational Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures (IPELC in Spanish) in implementing the [Bilingual Nests](#) strategy since 2014. This linguistic revitalization programme promotes intergenerational community meetings where knowledge and values are shared, targeting children from 0 to 4 years of age, in safe spaces where they can hear and speak their native languages. Mothers, fathers, caregivers, grandparents and community leaders guide children in their communities to learn their native language from an early age, paving the way for greater success in preschool through the transition to primary school and beyond: children who learn in their mother tongue in pre-primary and in the early grades are more likely to develop foundational skills than when taught in a second or unfamiliar language.

In coordination with IPELC, UNICEF is [supporting bilingual](#) nests in 29 indigenous communities with three types of nests:

- 1) Family nests:** Mothers, fathers and caregivers, who speak the native language naturally, communicate to their young children in daily household activities such as food preparation, house cleaning chores, personal grooming and play. Families are encouraged to meet and generate spaces for conversation.
- 2) Community nests:** Where mothers, fathers or caregivers are no longer native speakers, fluent grandparents and elders oversee language transmission to the children, with sessions organised at specific times and on certain days at the request of the community.

- 3) Institutional nests:** In childcare or children's centres, early childhood educators use indigenous languages as a medium of instruction for daily activities, such as storytelling, songs, conversations and games.

## RESULTS

- Currently, 29 indigenous peoples participate in the Bilingual Nests strategy, which reaches approximately 2,314 children (1,135 girls) under five years of age nationwide.
- In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restriction of face-to-face activities for early learners and their families, IPELC technicians, with the support of UNICEF, developed educational materials in digital formats that were disseminated via telephone messaging. This was complemented with the distribution of print materials—such as guides for families, materials with messages on COVID-19 prevention measures and guidance on traditional games that can be played at home—in 16 indigenous languages, benefitting 1,992 children (974 girls).
- In 2021, UNICEF trained 40 IPELC personnel to strengthen their technical capacity to implement the bilingual nests programme within indigenous communities across Bolivia.
- UNICEF organises annual bilingual nest meetings to usher the exchange of experiences, raise awareness among local and municipal authorities about the importance of the strategy and garner institutional and political support to initiate new implementation processes or consolidate those underway. About 50 participants attended the most recent virtual meeting in November 2020, and UNICEF is currently planning another meeting for December 2021.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Parental engagement must be woven into national education strategies.** In 2021, the Government elevated early childhood development to a national priority. Since involvement from parents is paramount to ensure that children learn, UNICEF is organising an intersectoral council, together with the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice and Planning, to incorporate parental engagement into national education strategies by the end of the year.
- **More materials in indigenous languages are needed in digital and non-digital formats.** The new era of digital learning has exposed [deep rooted disparities](#) in indigenous families' access to internet, connectivity and devices. More digital materials in indigenous languages are needed, and in the most remote areas of the country, radio and print must be buffed up to reach vulnerable families.
- **Adding to the evidence base.** To ensure the continuity of bilingualism in schools, the Bilingual Nests strategy must carry forward through the child's transition to primary school. UNICEF is adding to the evidence base regarding mother tongue instruction offered through the bilingual nests as well as analysing its impact on child development.

## NEXT STEPS

UNICEF and the Government plan to expand the Bilingual Nests strategy, especially to more parents in remote indigenous communities at risk of losing their oral tradition linked to their indigenous language, such as the Araona and Gwarasugw'e peoples. As well, they will work to explore the use of instant messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, for effective pedagogical management and programme leadership.

**Cost effectiveness:** From 2014 to date, UNICEF Bolivia has invested about \$US 480,000 to promote bilingual nests, reaching over 2,300 children of 29 indigenous people and nurturing the conservation of native languages as well as the integral development of children from 0 to 4 years old.

For more information, please contact:

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