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Indigenous Scholastic Education in Roraima, Brazilian Amazon: Intercultural Conflicts in Constructing Educational Proposals

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Abstract

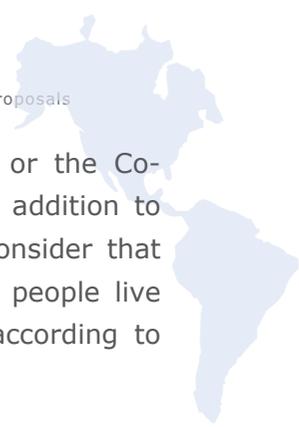
This article addresses the process through which indigenous communities seek to take ownership of schools, while promoting their transformation and adaptation to their reality. This has led to demands made of schools and especially the indigenous school system in the Brazilian state of Roraima. The author explains how this process is not free from contradictions, which are manifested in both the social changes induced by schools, especially in terms of intergenerational conflicts, and also in communities' expectations for school education. The article addresses three experiences in conceptual debates that have emerged in the context of the *Instituto Insikiran de Formación Superior Indígena*, at the *Universidad Federal de Roraima* (UFRR). Although these experiences are still underway, they have led to reflection on the experience of educating indigenous teachers in this Amazon region of Brazil, and in particular, have been useful in evaluating the experience on the basis of self-critical reflection.

Schooling in indigenous communities began with the catechizing imposition of the religious missions and schools of the Indian Protection Service [*Servicio de Protección al Indio* (SPI)] during the first half of the 20th century. This situation began to shift toward a growing control by indigenous communities over their own schools, especially starting in the 1970's when, in the context of social and indigenous mobilizations throughout Latin America, indigenous communities sought to take charge of the schools, promoting their transformation and adapting them to their reality. From this point on, leaders defended a replacement of non-indigenous teachers with hires from their own communities. This

allowed them to reclaim schools at a time when the indigenous school system was expanding significantly in Roraima and Brazil.

For the indigenous communities the movement defending education coincided with the struggle to defend their territory. The movement faced great resistance by the dominant power groups in the State of Roraima, which controlled the region's main economic activities: agricultural/livestock haciendas and mining. The invasion of these haciendas and of mining or the manual extraction of gold and diamonds (which was banned due to its highly degrading consequences to the environment) had a very negative impact on indigenous peoples.

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During these conflicts, the case of the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Territory, located on the border between Brazil, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, became emblematic. This region was previously disputed over by various colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, Holland and England (Farage, 1991; Santilli, 1994).

Despite the violence, environmental and moral degradation, and an entire political attack by the local power groups, the Supreme Court of Justice of Brazil issued a judgment in favor of the indigenous communities' claims when in 2009 it recognized the indigenous peoples' right to land in Raposa Serra do Sol according to the legal mechanisms of Brazilian law. This ruling helped to strengthen the empowerment of the indigenous communities, particularly in the definition of the issues incumbent on them.

It is also important to point out that the indigenous population of Roraima, as well as of Brazil as a nation, is not homogeneous, but rather quite diverse. This diversity applies to the number of populations and communities as well as the historical processes the communities experienced during the shaping of the national states that make up the present federation, which divided their territory and population.

Approximately 64,846 indigenous people live in the State of Roraima. The population of the **Carib** language family are distributed in the following manner: *Makuxi* 15,000 people; *Taurepang* 200; *Ingarikó* 1,000; *Yekuana* 180; *Patamona* 50; *Sapará* 50; *Wai-Wai* 1,366 and *Waimiri-Atroari* 1,000. There are about 6,000 *Wapixana* in the **Aruak** language family, and about 10,000 people in the **Yanomami** language family. Of all of these populations, only the *Waimiri-Atroari* and *Sapará* are not divided by international borders with the

Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela or the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. In addition to this information, we must also consider that approximately 30,000 indigenous people live in the state capital, Boa Vista, according to municipal data.

The colonial plan, with its religious, military and state aspects, held continuity during the 19th and 20th centuries, bringing into these lands the infrastructure necessary for occupational expansion. Cattle haciendas, schools and orphanages invaded indigenous lands, consolidating the expansion and imposition of the European civilization process. The indigenous populations were first integrated into the region in the Portuguese colonial market and later became part of the national market of Brazil (Lima, 1995).

Education was created in order to train workers committed to progress and to their homeland, strengthening the use of national symbols, territory, religion, language, etc. With this perspective they built schools for the indigenous population, shaping Christian men and women; patriots to be incorporated into the invaders' society of cattle-raising, mining and nationality.

Although the Catholic Church created a basis for action in the Surumu Mission in the early 20th century, the Indian Protection Service opened a school in 1923 in the San Marcos National Hacienda, which developed literacy and professional training programs for indigenous people. Courses included tanning and saddlery, blacksmithy and carpentry, with the purpose of training a workforce for the haciendas (CIDR, 1989, p. 29).

In 1948 a boarding school for young orphans was established in the Saint Joseph Catholic Mission, located in the Surumu River



region, within the current and emblematic Raposa Sierra do Sol Indigenous Territory. Thus began an indigenous schooling process which shaped the first group of indigenous teachers, who in 1972 were trained to teach at the 4th grade level of primary education, and then in 1975 up to the 8th grade of primary education. This boarding school in the Surumu Mission went on to be recognized as a training center for indigenous leaders and was widely accepted among the various communities. María Auxiliadora Souza Melo (2000) emphasized the importance of this school in the construction of proposals and political and educational practices which strengthened the foundations of the indigenous movement in Roraima.

In 1979, when the Rio Blanco prelate became the Dioceses of Roraima, the boarding school went on to be called the "Training Center for Indigenous Leaders." In a thought process linked to liberation theology, and as an option for the poor, several training actions were carried out. Meetings between the *tuxauas* (indigenous leaders), catechists and teachers were a mainstay of this political training.

Between 1989 and 1991, several courses were carried out, such as dressmaking (two months), leadership training (five days) and saddlery (tanning leather and making horse saddles; three months). There was also a course on indigenous traditions as well as courses on business administration, cattle handling, foreman training, indigenous traditions and catechism for the Wapixana and Makuxi people, carpentry, nursing, veterinary sciences, courses for indigenous teachers and mechanic courses (Melo, 2000).

Melo (2000) shows that this center symbolically summarizes the argument of the leaders of assemblies and meetings in which

one of the political and educational foundations of the indigenous movement was established, especially the Indigenous Council of Roraima [*Consejo Indígena de Roraima* (CIR)] and the Roraima Indigenous Teachers Organization [*Organización de los Profesores Indígenas de Roraima* (OPIR)] (Melo, 2000). Many debates arose from the Training Center for Indigenous Leaders, which have later multiplied in the indigenous communities. These include debates on social projects and self-sustainability, the need for land guarantee and the right to an identity, as well as participation within the new national and global economic guidelines.

This was made possible by the increasing pressure exerted by the indigenous communities in their efforts to express their dissatisfaction with non-indigenous teachers. The indigenous leaders developed a joint action demanding an education concerned with its cultures. Ideas and ideals for an education that would respect their reality were gradually constructed in meetings and assemblies.

In 1985, when democracy was returning to Brazil, the federal government held a national debate on education through the Ministry of Education. The debate was called "D day," and the main issues to debate were: "what kind of school do we have?" and "what kind of school do we want?" The state government of Roraima, through the Department of Education, organized a meeting in Boa Vista in order to debate the pedagogical situation of indigenous schools.

During this meeting, the *tuxauas* and teachers criticized the educational system that was being imposed on indigenous children and youths. Several proposals were made on this occasion, such as training courses, the hiring of indigenous teachers, and students' right to study and learn in their own languages. It



should be stressed that a considerable portion of the Macuxi and Wapixana population, who suffered the most severe territorial invasion, speaks only Portuguese. Therefore, the demand to learn their languages became a political platform of recognition and valuing.

In response to these claims and demands from the Indigenous Teachers Organization, in 1986 the State Department of Education opened an administrative space with indigenous representation, called the Indigenous Education Center [*Núcleo de Educación Indígena* (NEI)] (Oliveira, 2000). This center's objectives were to organize, participate in and coordinate the work and activities related to education in indigenous schools. The NEI, which came to be known as the Indigenous Education Division [*División de Educación Indígena* (DIEI)], is currently under the direction of an indigenous teacher. However, it faces serious problems due to a lack of its own logistical resources and necessary pedagogical material. This prevents the NEI from responding to the demands and needs of the leaders of indigenous communities and organizations in favor of indigenizing the schools from a perspective of interculturality and multilingualism.

In 1991 the responsibility of providing indigenous education shifted from the National Indian Foundation [FUNAI] to the Ministry of Education. With this shift, the form of addressing services was modified, and the system was expanded in accordance with new public financing policies.

In this context of mobilization the communities expressed themselves with regard to various situations, such as: a) dissatisfaction felt by parents of students as well as by students themselves regarding the performance of non-indigenous teachers; b) the use of extremely obsolete pedagogical

methods that resorted to punishment and violence; c) an overvaluing of Brazilian culture and language; d) promoting disregard for indigenous culture and languages; e) encouraging cultural domination and political and social submission. The response to this was a joint action by the *tuxauas*, demanding an education concerned with indigenous culture.

At the same time, representatives as well as indigenous teachers continued to seek alternatives. In 1987, in the city of Manaus, the first meeting of indigenous teachers of the States of Amazonas and Roraima (which today reaches other states of the Amazon region) was held. This shaped a significant multi-ethnic coordination in defense of a scholastic education that would guarantee autonomy for indigenous peoples in all aspects of social life. Thus was created the Indigenous Teachers Commission of Amazonas, Roraima and Acre [*Comisión de los Profesores Indígenas de Amazonas, Roraima y Acre* (COPIAR)] (Días da Silva, 1997), which in 2000 changed its name to the Indigenous Teachers Council of the Amazon Region [*Consejo de los Profesores Indígenas de la Región Amazónica* (COPIAM)].

The indigenous teachers of Roraima have been a central element in these discussions. In 1990 they held a meeting in the mission of the Surumu River (Oliveira, 2000), in which 84 teachers from the Makuxi, Wapixana, Taurepang and Ingarikó communities came together seeking to strengthen the defense of a scholastic education that would address the growing demands of indigenous communities. In this meeting, the Roraima Indigenous Teachers Organization [*Organización de los Profesores Indígenas de Roraima* (OPIR)] was created, with support from the Roraima Indigenous Council [*Consejo Indígena de Roraima* (CIR)], which provided a room for teacher activities on its premises before the



teachers obtained a site of their own.¹

Thanks to the indigenous teachers' work, in 1994 the Roraima Government carried out the "Indigenous Teaching Certificate Project" (Oliveira, 2000), which trained indigenous teachers for the high school level. This course trained 230 teachers at a professional level, which enabled them to teach primary education from grades 1 through 4. In recent years, the Department of Education of the State of Roraima has created a new indigenous teaching certificate project called Tamikan, and a new teaching certificate course exclusively for indigenous language-speakers is currently being developed.

It should be noted that the structure of the educational system in Brazil is divided into the following levels: *Early Childhood* or Pre-School Education, serving students ages 3 and 4, provided exclusively by municipalities. Students then progress to *Primary Education*, which is provided among municipalities, only for the first four years of schooling. In the Roraima state government this level comprises the majority of establishments. After the latest reform of 2010, Primary Education now consists of twelve years of schooling, divided into two levels: *Elementary Education* (years 1 through 9) and *Middle or High School Education* (3 additional years).

Since the year 2000, a demand by the OPIR to the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR) facilitated the creation of spaces for indigenous higher education. In 2001 the Insikiran Center for Indigenous Higher Education was created, going on to become an institute within the UFRR structure in 2009. The Intercultural Bachelor's Degree program was started in 2003, along with the Bachelor of Indigenous Territory Management in 2009. Today there is a high demand for graduate-level training, while the creation of a new course in indigenous

community health is taking shape. Aside from these specific courses, the UFRR has created mechanisms specifically for indigenous people's admission through the Indigenous Admissions Process. In 2010 the UFRR had an approximate total of 10% indigenous students, which continued to be achieved through a process of internal debate and awareness within the university, in the face of much resistance and many challenges (Fernández, 2008).

Although it can be observed that the expansion of the school system is accompanied by a growing demand for educational services by indigenous people, many demands are still left unsatisfied. For example, the unfulfilled need for education to deliver practical knowledge to young people, which is evident in the high demand for professional training.

How Indigenous Schools Work in Roraima

In Brazil, the Federal Constitution of 1988 as well as the Law of Guidelines and Bases for Education [*Ley de Directrices y Bases para la Educación* (LDB)], and the Definition of the Indigenous School of 1999 ensured a "differentiated" education for indigenous people. This education was based on intercultural respect and the need to adapt pedagogical content and practices to the current reality experienced in the communities.

Being that many of the main issues that indigenous school education in Roraima addresses arise as proposals from community bases, they are being appropriated and respond to the demands of the school system. However, they are being "domesticated" and stripped of their critical content. Of these main issues, the following can be highlighted:



- Specific rules for indigenous schools, in which each school can and must define its pedagogical aspects and its relationship with the surrounding community;
- The construction of curricula and definition of content for primary and middle education in indigenous schools, such that the reality of the students and their communities are addressed;
- The creation of a State Council of Indigenous Education, with extensive indigenous participation, which must define and oversee the execution of pedagogical proposals and the management of financial resources;
- Seeking self-sustainability projects which are beneficial for schools and communities;
- Researching and producing teaching material which is suitable to the schools' and students' realities.

The definition of these points offers significant challenges for indigenous organizations, as it implies the creation of proposals to carry out public policies in the field of indigenous education in the middle and long term. This is something that neither the Brazilian Government nor the State of Roraima have decidedly supported. Without the financial support of these governmental bodies, the indigenous organizations are faced with a severe lack of economic and human resources, difficulties with teacher training,

and a lack of infrastructure, support and specialized professional advising.

The permanent demand for developing these aspects indicates their absence and lack of achievement in the practice of indigenous schools. We can also observe the absence of an integrated, far-reaching plan that could involve all participants in this process.

Upon analyzing the expansion of the school system we can observe the existence of several programs and special projects, which are not always linked to the central proposals of the indigenous communities. This is the case, for example, of school scholarship, for families who send their children to school, along with the Eradication of Child Labor Program [*Programa de Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil (PETI)*] and programs such as Solidarity in Literacy Teaching, Friends of the School, etc.

Among the teaching formats developed in indigenous schools we can emphasize: youth and adult literacy and teaching [*Enseñanza de Jovenes y Adultos (EJA)*], for students of various grade levels that attend all educational levels, such as elementary and high school, as well as special education and distance learning. One can understand the nature of indigenous school education as a subsystem within the national educational system which is affected by other mechanisms, without clear educational objectives. For example, it can be observed that the EJA material is a super concentrate of what is taught to children in primary school, without a critical debate on the specific needs for the education of adults and youths.

In recent years school enrollment has fluctuated between 10,000 and 13,000 students in indigenous schools². Of the 222 indigenous schools belonging to the State



Government of Roraima, 40 offer schooling up to the 9th grade of primary education. Of these schools, 36 offer education through the high school level.

Notwithstanding this expansion of the school system and statistical data, in the various regions of Roraima communities discuss their ideas of what school education should be in several forums. This is because it has shifted from being an imposition to being a demand. The communities have developed a debate dynamic in which they periodically evaluate the difficulties they are facing in a very interesting exercise of active democracy, as Bertely notes (2009). Thus a two-way process can be observed, as on one hand the school system is being expanded while on the other hand schools are being appropriated by the indigenous communities. It is important to point out that it is a process not without conflicts and contradictions. In some regions the school has a greater dialogue with the community leaders and councils, while in others there is a lack of unity and a stronger influence by local anti-indigenous politicians.

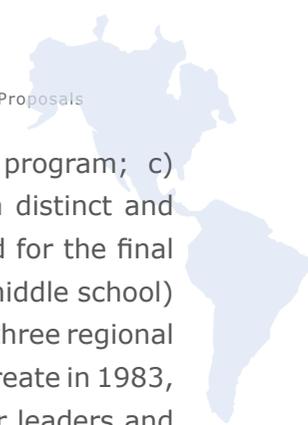
In spite of these difficulties as well as various socio-environmental issues, indigenous people are constructing their own educational proposals. From the perspective of their own pedagogical experiences and due to their great diversity of languages and cultures, they maintain that the school's operation depends on the "community" in which it is located.

Generally speaking, the operation of indigenous schools is different than that of non-indigenous schools (both urban and rural). Indigenous communities have established a dynamic that integrates the school into communal actions. There are periodic meetings for evaluation and planning. The schools carry out general planning of the annual school

calendar jointly with the community, and at the end of the year there is an evaluation of the teachers' work and of the students' educational process. In most communities, there are monthly meetings, with a debate model that addresses the main tasks performed, always keeping to a subject relevant to education. This is the moment in which the school and teachers must be accountable to the community.

Unlike the non-indigenous schools, in which the school principal is appointed by the Department of Education, in the indigenous communities of Roraima the communal assembly selects the school principal from among the indigenous teachers working there, who have previously undergone a process of evaluation and approval. These teachers are hired by the government of the State of Roraima, although there are still some federal contracts lingering from before 1988, when the Federal Territory of Roraima was transformed by constitutional decree into a new state of the Brazilian Union. We have witnessed cases in which the Department of Education has wanted to impose its own principals on the indigenous schools, but the indigenous communities have not accepted these actions and have even forbidden access to the state-appointed person, making it impossible for them to take the position. In these cases the state has had no choice but to desist.

The legal responsibility of implementing school education in the indigenous communities falls to the state and municipal governments (the latter solely for early childhood or pre-school education). Financing for public school education is defined in the Federal Constitution, which establishes that each state is obligated to set aside a fixed percentage of resources from state tax revenue for public education. When these resources are insufficient, the



federal government supplements the demand, which is not the case for Roraima. After conducting years of research in the region, we were never able to obtain reliable data on the amount of resources directed to indigenous school education in Roraima.

In some indigenous schools Parent Teacher Associations (PTA's) have been formed. These are legal entities recognized by the school system as fit to receive a part of the resources designated for the schools, in such a way that the parents and teachers themselves can manage the purchase of food and materials essential for the school. This extremely interesting initiative, which could strengthen school autonomy, has been confronted with the issue of technical accounting demands, leaving many PTA's in debt to the public finance system, and in turn causing them to lose the possibility of managing new resources. This is due to the lack of guidance and technical support from the school system.

Although the school system has not met established goals and there is a clear lack of attention to fulfilling public policies due to the Roraima government's lack of interest, we can see a positive outcome in the way citizen participation has been strengthened in indigenous communities. In order to observe the school system's development process between 1993 and 2005, we must first understand how several social achievements have been institutionalized: a) the process of consultation with the communities cannot be overlooked, and is strengthened as an institutional practice; b) the teacher training process has continued to broaden in a perspective that differs from standard teacher training, and has been fostered through the indigenous teacher certification as well as the

Intercultural Bachelor's Degree program; c) in recent years there has been a distinct and continuous growth in the demand for the final years of primary education (i.e. middle school) and high school; d) instead of the three regional centers that the NEI expected to create in 1983, the communities, along with their leaders and teachers, maintain ten regional centers, five of which the school system strives to recognize, although no basic structure has been created and the resources to support the schools have not been secured.

This process of indigenous appropriation of schools can be seen as an ethno-genetic process (Bertely, 2003; González, 2008), in the sense that the redefinitions create perceptions and realities that are different than those originally introduced by the school and the school system.

Community Demands and the Indigenous High School

In order to properly reflect on the expectations that the indigenous communities have established for school education, we must refer to some of their main demands, which are echoed throughout Roraima:

- The need for more professionals in the communities' schools to provide students with professional training;
- Opening up options for students who complete high school and find themselves "stuck," without the means to continue studying and without a clear use for their productive tasks in the community;
- Opening up career options for these students, as they have to return to

hunting and fishing, despite the fact that the quantity of game and fish is decreasing, and the *milpas* or *roças* have become rather unproductive due to the population increase and the degradation of areas available for farming;

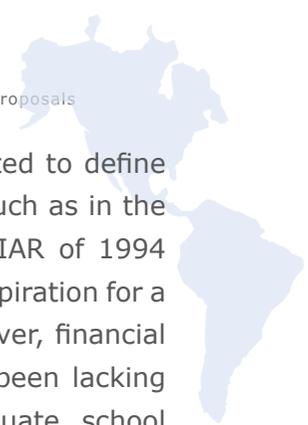
- Improving the agricultural production system and seeking new technologies and economic resources, as, although the inhabitants rate the conditions of their forests and natural savannah fields as good, they also feel the need to improve the agricultural production system;
- Improving the teaching of practical content, as students and communities claim that although their youths are educated in the schools, they do not learn how to do anything practical to work or survive.

There is also a major difficulty among the parents of indigenous students which impedes them from accompanying and helping their children with their school studies. This is because it is not part of their life training to support their children's studies outside of the classroom. While offering high school level education was standardized between 2004 and 2005, many doubts arose with regard to the meaning of school education during this process. Many indigenous parents and teachers were raised and educated within a traditional school system focused on the classroom, and they question a teacher who seeks to perform new activities within the community. As Gasché (2008) points out, this becomes a great challenge for the indigenous teacher, since introducing changes means

facing resistance and criticism. Dialogue and creativity are necessary in order to defeat resistance to new educational practices.

Until 2002 there were only three indigenous schools under the authority of the Roraima Department of Education that offered high school in the "regular" format (that is, in accordance with the model promoted by the Ministry of Education of Brazil. This was in addition to a school in the Surumu Mission, which came to be the only indigenous school education project at the high school level aimed at professional training in farming and livestock, known as the Raposa Sierra do Sol Training and Cultural Center. During this period, some schools offered high school level education in the Youth and Adult Education format. However, the most significant growth came about with the creation of a project aimed specifically at expanding the offer, which was known as Differentiated Indigenous Regular High School [*Bachillerato Regular Diferenciado Indígena*]. Between 2004 and 2005 this became a viable offer in the indigenous communities. There are currently 36 schools that offer complete schooling, with an approximate total of 1,351 students at this school level. These schools serve only the Makuxi, Wapichana and Taurepang people (although only one of these schools serves this last group).

Upon analyzing the proposals of the Roraima Department of Education, we were able to observe a conceptual confusion on the part of its administrators. The very nomenclature of "Differentiated Indigenous Regular" demonstrates the central point of contradiction, as the Department of Education hopes to create a standardized high school that addresses indigenous uniqueness. To this must be added the lack of economic resources to make the classes viable, for instance



to purchase the fuel for electrical power generators, as communities use the high school at night, since during the day the classrooms are occupied by primary school students.

This lack of resources and political will is also reflected in the lack of teachers to meet the demand of indigenous students, especially during the first years of establishment. A recent public contest that was held to hire non-indigenous teachers to meet the demands of high school implicates a backward step in the face of decades of progress in this area, particularly in the hiring of indigenous teachers.

Analysis of these high schools' curricula demonstrates that there is an implicit contradiction in the nomenclature of "Differentiated Indigenous Regular." When comparing the Federal Constitution, which defends the actual processes of creating knowledge for indigenous people, to the national education plan, which imposes 75% of the common national plan, the latter only permits a 25% difference. Thus the high schools offer the study of indigenous languages, but with a reduced number of hours, equivalent to 4 classroom hours per week. Special projects, scheduled every Friday, have stimulated creativity among the communities but are still insufficient in addressing specific training needs, and are not aligned with the principles of interculturality and multilingualism.

Unlike other Latin American countries, Brazil has not used the nomenclature of intercultural education to refer to indigenous school education. And although in some documents the concept of intercultural and bilingual education has been used, there has been no conceptual debate in Brazil that allows us to clearly define the discussion on the principles of indigenous school education. In this sense, it has been the indigenous

movement itself that has attempted to define the principles of this education, such as in the case of the 15 principles of COPIAR of 1994 (RCNEI, 1998), which were the inspiration for a series of legal instruments. However, financial resources and political will have been lacking to actually implement an adequate school education.

Difficulties Faced by Indigenous Students

One of the issues that indigenous schools in Roraima face deals with understanding the process of social change led by the school and how it must be addressed within it. This is especially true with regard to the issue of conflict between generations. Some serious conflicts have become apparent regarding the different world views and life possibilities among indigenous communities.

Two opposing visions have been put forward in various debates within the indigenous communities, and they relate to territory conflicts between indigenous peoples as well as between indigenous peoples and national society sectors.

The struggle for an education that is contextualized and tailored to the needs of communities was associated with the fight for territories. Those who defended the official recognition of extensive indigenous lands have identified themselves with proposals that value indigenous culture and history, placing indigenous values at the center of the debate. They have defended a "specific and differentiated" education, close to the principles that we know generically today as interculturality.



However, another sector that involves communities and indigenous organizations has defended that landowners should remain in indigenous territories. This group has resorted to the use of power speeches focusing on the idea of development, which serves as a foundation for them to maintain that the indigenous communities need a “quality” education, which will only be possible if indigenous schools function in the same way as non-indigenous schools in the cities do. For this position, cultural value holds no importance and is reduced to a mere political position of its indigenous opponents, which at its core would only serve to make indigenous people go back to being naked and to make non-indigenous people leave the regions, taking with them any hope for development and improvement of life conditions.

The holders of this position have manipulated the essential elements surrounding development discourses, which also coincide with the position of the landowner’s groups who have portrayed indigenous people and their way of life as the only obstacle to achieving development. The indigenous people who have defended that non-indigenous invaders should remain, co-opted and manipulated through essentialisms and epistemological conflicts, have rejected differentiated education. They want to be “white” (or European) and claim that, up to a certain point, a European education is the only one capable of preparing them to face the labor market, even though this means they have to stop being indigenous.

For their part, those who defend the indigenous territories and the withdrawal of non-indigenous invaders have stressed the need to discuss processes of cultural change, but from a perspective of cultural value. This is because they recognize as nothing more than deceit the idea that city education would be

better than the education they can construct and sustain for themselves.

Indigenous students face the harsh demands of the labor market and the impossibility of seeing any sources of wealth or economic production in their own lands, which have been demarcated and recognized by the state. Some of these students succumb to the alienating thought that they must deny all things indigenous just to survive in the non-indigenous world. Even those who come from communities that defend cultural value encounter difficulties in understanding and conceptualizing this debate.

In this context, it is certain that the school has manipulated knowledge and values. This is evident in young people’s disinterest in working in the *milpas* fields. Their argument is that they studied so they would not have to do physical labor in the fields. In this way, the work force that was traditionally dedicated to felling trees for farming has been ideologically paralyzed. In the morning young people are at school, in the afternoon they are attending school programs that barely train them, in the evening they play soccer, and at night they watch television. This routine distances them from daily socializing and work.

In these conditions young people are plagued by serious deficiencies in terms of literacy and basic arithmetic, from the first years of primary education through the last years of high school. This translates into high drop-out rates.

Alan Douglas, a student in the Intercultural Bachelor’s Degree program (1998), studied the reasons that were driving Wapichana students to drop out of their high school studies in the Manoá community (bordering on the Co-operative Republic of



Guyana). In these studies Douglas emphasized the cultural conflicts the students were experiencing. For example, several students stopped attending school because they thought they did not have clothing suitable to study, thus they returned to their work in the *milpas*.

The conflict is worsened when we consider that work in the *milpas* is devalued and that, through the media's wide influence, salaried jobs and employer dependency are valued as the only forms of economic and productive insertion. At the same time, work in the *roças* has been declining, due to environmental degradation, population increase and the impossibility of occupying new spaces, as the haciendas and international borders have frozen land use. This social and epistemological conflict must be understood from a pedagogical perspective on the conflict (Gadotti, 2001). From this standpoint we may seek to make the conflict evident in order to discuss and address it. This entails tackling a conflict that is inherent to the social process, which other educational philosophies hide and suppress.

In this context the argument once again arises that "differentiated" education is useless and that cultural value is a backward step that does not allow entry into the labor market, creating major frustrations among youths and adults, who leave school with families and mouths to feed. It is possible that this frustration is due to the fact that the school created great expectations that have been impossible to fulfill.

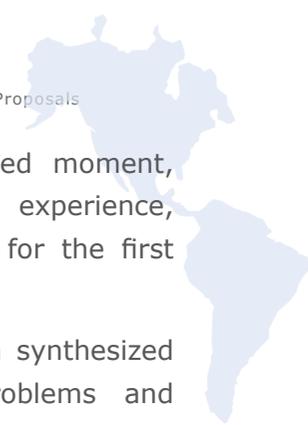
For decades it has been steadily noted that one of the reasons indigenous people use to justify migration to cities is the search for better conditions and the promise of higher education. For this reason, high school in the communities seeks to respond to the need to

provide an education whose central focus is the social and cultural value of the communities.

In the case of the Macuxi and Wapichana communities, there are various sociolinguistic situations that affect students as well as teachers. These two populations faced the most severe and systematic invasion and, consequently, the greatest cultural imposition. Other indigenous populations in the most remote regions have been able to maintain a geographic enclosure which has allowed them to better resist cultural invasion. These towns have also maintained a greater use of their own languages, one of their demands being for the study of Portuguese. Meanwhile the first two groups have continued to demand the study of their own languages. For many Macuxi and Wapichana their first language or mother tongue is Portuguese, which is the language used in the everyday life of communities and families.

Accounts from teachers and indigenous leaders accuse schools of being one of the main reasons for loss of use of indigenous languages over the last three decades. For them, the Portuguese language was imposed in the school, and with it a series of knowledge that confused the schools and communities. This situation has been an obstacle to bilingual teaching and to the debate on the use of indigenous languages in the communities and, by extension, in indigenous schools. This is explained by the process of cultural invasion, which made the generation prior to the current teachers think that indigenous languages and cultures would stop being necessary and would become a source of discrimination.

In this context, debates on valuing cultural and indigenous language continue to be broadened, generating a political discourse in favor of the use of these languages. Thus



the indigenous teacher's movement steadily seeks to create a context of use and value, which has made indigenous languages an important point in new public contests for the hiring of indigenous teachers. Nonetheless, there continues to be a lack of determined and specific practice in this sense.

New Pedagogical Experiences

In this section I would like to address three experiences of conceptual debate that arose in the context of the Insikiran Institute for Indigenous Higher Education, of the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR). Although these experiences are still ongoing, they have helped us to think about our experience of indigenous teacher training in this Amazon region of Brazil, and above all have made us evaluate the experience through self-critical reflection.

First, I will comment on the experience of creating the Intercultural Bachelor's Degree Program, especially the idea of contextual subjects. It should be emphasized that it was an experience in which several professionals participated, with a variety of paths (Carvalho *et al.*, 2008). A key point in the discussion of the project was the moment in which we decided not to deal with "disciplines" but rather with "contextualized subjects," in addition to replacing the idea of educational competencies with the attitudes, values and skills to be developed in the students. One colleague who was essential to this understanding was Angela Kurovsky, who had previous experience with indigenous school education in the Amazon working for the OPAN. It was she who suggested and explained how contextualized subjects worked. This possibility of not dealing

with disciplines was a watershed moment, as we chose to explore a new experience, accounts of which only existed for the first years of schooling.

The plan for the program synthesized some of the main social problems and educational needs that would have to be addressed in cooperation with the indigenous teachers at the UFRR. The experience has been enriching, and although we have only put in a scant amount of hours, they were enough to show us the proposal's potential. The best exchange took place when various professors with different training came together in the classroom, along with our students, discussing the issues at hand, arguing about these subjects, and seeking a deeper and clearer understanding. They were inter- and trans-disciplinary experiences in which we all—professionals from different backgrounds and educations and various indigenous teachers, belonging to seven different tribes—discussed the issues and social problems of the communities, stimulating the development of pedagogical projects in the indigenous schools where these issues would be reflected.

Not everything has been positive, since we have not always known how to make use of the contextual subjects in order to reflect on specific activities or responses to address the social problems that the communities face. Although these problems generated the idea of contextualized subjects, some have shown themselves to be more contextualized than others. This causes us to think self-critically that we have not always been capable or that we have not caused these contextualized subjects to become contextualized responses that could functionally address the problems that created them, often falling into a discursive and abstract study, which does not resolve these problems.



In pedagogical terms, the crucial point is the difference between wanting to work on contextual subjects and being able to do so in practice (Gasché, 2009). Perhaps this is due to the training process, as in the process in indigenous schools where, despite the proposal of working with contextualized subjects, it has focused on scholastic knowledge and the discursive aspect rather than on the community's practical experience, as Gasché (2008) has encouraged us to think. That is, what is sought is an understanding that is close to reality, within the framework of the community's day-to-day life.

This quest for comprehension and debate, briefly outlined here, has been a practical, reflective and self-critical exercise with a very enriching debate. Although we do not have a conclusive and definite answer, the need to continue this quest enriches and strengthens us.

Secondly, participation in the project entitled "Intercultural Citizen Education for the Indigenous People of Latin America in Terms of Poverty," of the International Network of Intercultural Studies [*Red Internacional de Estudios Interculturales* (RIDEI)] stands out as a moment of reflection and education. Run by the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP) and funded by the Ford Foundation, this network, created in 2004, brought together six universities in Latin America. In addition to the PUCP and the UFRR, it also included the Universidad Politécnica Salesiana (UPS) in Ecuador, the PROEIB Andes/Universidad Mayor of San Simón, Bolivia, the Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) in Mexico, and the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (URACCAN), Nicaragua.

This network brought with it certain local

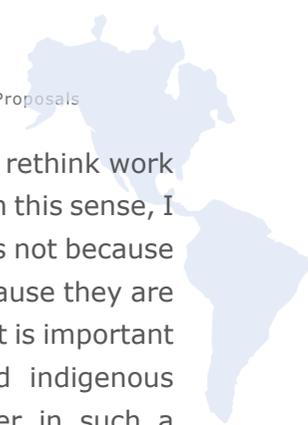
experiences of debate within the framework of the project, which allowed us to take a step beyond formulating a task of reflection and production of educational materials. We have already worked on citizenship, education and interculturality issues; however once we addressed them in a joint and integrated manner, a powerful issue of reflection arose.

We brought this issue to the indigenous schools and addressed it especially in the more advanced levels of primary education (grades 5 through 8 and high school). We worked at two schools in the Pium and Barata communities in the Taiano region, creating collective debates, study groups, seminars, information technology workshops, reading and writing workshops and a conference with various activities, all designed to reflect on the subject of intercultural citizen education. We wondered and discussed: what does it mean to be an indigenous citizen? We discovered how exercising citizen rights is linked to environmental conservation, literacy, reading comprehension and writing skills.

Various educational materials arose from this experience. One was a book aimed at high school students (Carvalho *et al.*, 2007); another was a proposal for educational materials for indigenous teachers (Repetto *et al.*, 2008), and a documentary video for discussing the issues of intercultural citizen education. In the school the matter was very interesting, allowing several different activities to be developed along with reflections on intercultural citizen education.

What stands out about this experience is the progress we accomplished and the presentation of the subject of intercultural citizen education from a trans-disciplinary perspective and with an open dialogue upon leaving the experience.

A third outstanding aspect is the



operation, since 2010, of two sister-projects: the PIBID Intercultural Bachelor's Degree project, under the direction of Professor Fabiola Carvalho, and the PET Intercultural project, which I directed. Both were backed by the Ministry of Education of Brazil. The first project carried out a research experiment in three indigenous communities: Barata, Canaoani and Malacheta. The second project was carried out in the Maruwai River Basin, in the indigenous territory of San Marcos, and nine communities of that region participated. In these experiments we sought to put an intercultural inductive pedagogical proposal into practice (Bertely, 2008a y 2008b; Gasche, 2008), theoretically as well as methodologically. We are currently outlining the formalization of a third project to include the participation of other communities.

We started by researching and analyzing the situation experienced by the school and we are preparing – theoretically as well as methodologically – the team that will research the communities' cultural calendar in detail. In future stages we will discuss the construction of new pedagogical proposals from the perspective of clarifying the cultural calendar and indigenous knowledge.

Carrying out this proposal has allowed us to consider the indigenous school's work in a different manner, within the framework of criticisms of the dominant pedagogical model, in order to build curricular proposals for the school that have a clear focus on education for the management of the territory. The aim is that student training is centered on research. This cultural vision has great potential for reflection and action (Gasché, 2008).

These three experiences, which were new to our team, stand out not because they are finished pieces but rather because they have signified moments of modernization, reviewing ideas, practices and new systems, nurturing

reflections that have helped us to rethink work on indigenous school education. In this sense, I have addressed these experiences not because they are pure reflections, but because they are moments of synthesis and unity. It is important to emphasize that teachers and indigenous leaders are participating together in such a way that they have become moments of inter-learning (Gasché, 2008), inter-comprehension and mutual collaboration.

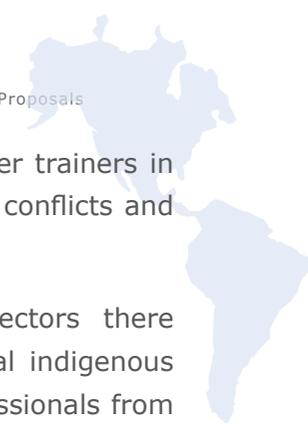
Conclusion

In conclusion, we can highlight three aspects relevant to understanding the schooling process and the demands for education in the indigenous communities of Roraima.

First, we must highlight the Roraima government's difficulty in strengthening public policies that address indigenous school education. This is reflected in the lack of available economic resources to address the needs of schools in indigenous communities. Food and school supplies are needed, as well as continuity in school transportation and above all a pedagogical debate to define the guidelines of indigenous school education.

This is reflected in the demands that the school system has made upon imposing the construction of school rules and pedagogical political projects, using standard forms and debates that focus much more on the rules of school operation than on the conceptual and educational debate of the school.

In the implementation of high school, this lack of concern on the part of the school system was manifested in the absence of a more intense and productive dialogue to define curricula, establish the school calendar, and



encourage the use of indigenous languages and the use of methodologies suitable for teaching an indigenous language as a second language. It was also evident in the lack of a systematic stimulus for the production of educational materials for indigenous teachers, as well as resources that can support the school's educational activities, including indigenous educational research.

The anti-indigenous context of Roraima without a doubt attempts to influence the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Education such that there will be no chance of understanding the educational needs of indigenous communities. For example, in early 2011 the Department of Education of Roraima canceled the fulfillment of a new stage in the Tamikan teacher training course due to the lack of funds, which had been diverted to the governor's most recent re-election campaign in late 2010. These actions sparked not only a discourse of exclusion, but also a systematic practice of devaluing and nonfulfillment of public policies, where the rights of citizens are subordinate to the marketing needs of public policy makers.

A second important aspect to point out is that the schools expressed their desire to be able to offer an education enmeshed within the reality of the community, and in doing so they raise a fierce criticism of the de-contextualized way in which the school works — that is to say, using language that has imposed worldviews, epistemological concerns and a Eurocentric and alienating discursive technology.

In this context the demand for a professional education speaks to the desire to see students "trained," in other words, fully qualified to face the work and social challenges of adult life. The idea that school education is "worthless" should make us reflect on the general role we teachers play, as

well as the specific role of teacher trainers in this chain of misunderstandings, conflicts and contradictions.

In various indigenous sectors there is a need to develop the internal indigenous job market, which requires professionals from various fields of knowledge and work. This is in opposition to the regional work market and economic production. An example of this last type of approach can be observed in seminars at the Federal University of Roraima, which address development and Amazonia, but do not take into account the existence of indigenous peoples and other traditional populations in the greater Amazon region.

The communities demand training for professionals who can sell or trade services within the communities — services such as maintenance of agricultural equipment, boat motors and electrical generator motors are highly valuable. There is also a need for professionals in the veterinary, agricultural, health care and teaching fields.

Training for these professionals brings about new challenges, such as the need for new technologies and knowledge versus cultural value. This apparent conflict, which continues to be a permanent reconstructed and updated tension, clears the path for social change and traditionalist criticism, although it also opens up contradictions and ambiguities.

Thirdly, the demand for cultural value stands out; implicating a social and political training focused on values, concepts, icons and symbols, but above all on practical and everyday experiences of what is actually being done. This could be the final blow dealt to the cultural invasion; having imposed acceptance of the school, the theme of cultural value now appears at its core. It appears as a desire



to discuss participation in society as well as a social project about life, about the use of natural resources, and about Brazil.

Cultural value is not mere folklore in the indigenous leaders' discourse, unlike what we see in Brazil on April 19th, the official Day of the Indian, which is part of the state's indigenous policies. On this day, both public and private schools dress the children up like "Indians." They place a crown of feathers painted with fluorescent colors on their heads and put finger paint on their faces. Aside from being associated with scholastic content that generalizes about and misinforms on indigenous people, this image represents a generic supposedly Amazonian indigenous person (Ramos, 1998). Nevertheless, in the public schools very little is said about the historical consequences of the invasion and

about the exercising of citizen rights.

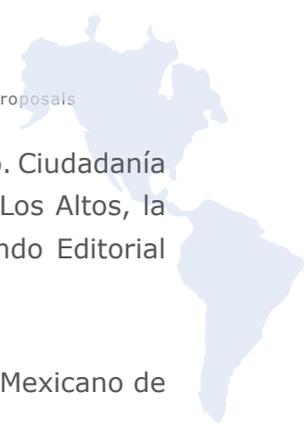
The school system must allow the opening of social and cultural spaces for indigenous knowledge. They must not do so abstractly, but rather with specific activities, debates on which subjects should be researched and which should not, how and when they should be researched, etc. They must seek methodologies for the collaborative construction of research projects and social intervention that have a clear social commitment to historical figures and their visions of the world. This is not a legal debate, but rather an epistemological one. Among these contradictions there are fissures that allow us to experience new proposals for looking at the world and creating knowledge, and we must experience them.

Endnotes

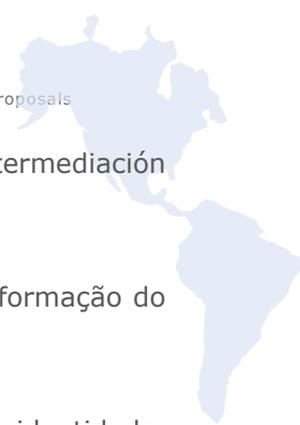
- 1 Data obtained from research carried out as a doctoral candidate associated with the research project: "Indigenous Organizations and Local Development in the Amazon Region," coordinated by Professor Bruce Albert, of the I.R.D. (French Research Institute on Development – ex ORSTOM) in agreement with the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research (CNPq) – Brazil, between 1998 and 2000.
- 2 Secretary of Education, Government of the State of Roraima. It is worth mentioning that by including municipal schools, the numbers reach a total enrollment of approximately 11,500 Indian students for 2010 students

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