

# ADULT EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES  
AND LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT AND  
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ADULT EDUCATION  
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*Indigenous education and the prevalent denial of special provisions in form and content of education for indigenous populations are currently widely discussed. Witness the present edition of our review which you hold in your hands.*

*Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to introduce the following series of articles with a quotation of the famous North American scientist, diplomat, politician and writer Benjamin Franklin from the year 1784 that shows that the topic is by no means a new one, nor are adequate answers and proposals.*

**Benjamin Franklin**

#### **Remarks concerning the savages of North America**

»At the treaty of Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, anno 1744, between the Government of Virginia and the Six Nations, the commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech, that there was at Williamsburg a college with a fund for educating Indian youth: and that if the chiefs of the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their sons to that college, the government would take care that they be well provided for, and instructed in all the learning of the white people.

The Indians' spokesman replied:

We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal and we thank you heartily.

But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things: and you will not therefore take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it: several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces: they were instructed in all your sciences: but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors: they were totally good for nothing.

We are however not the less obligated by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it, and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.«

*Indigenous rights and values are slowly receiving public recognition, at least in the rhetoric of national policies. However, very little of this has as yet become apparent in the organization of educational systems in Latin America and elsewhere. The following is an example of the laborious process required if the proclaimed policies are to be put into effect.*

**Luís Donisete Benzi Grupioni /  
Mariana Kawall Leal Ferreira**

## **What is a true indigenous school? Indigenous societies of Brazil and their schools**

### **The indigenous societies in Brazil**

For the indigenous nations of America the arrival of the Europeans in the New World meant the advent of various processes of domination, exploitation, war, slavery and extermination. Many in-

indigenous societies succumbed to the coercion and determination of the conquistadors, while others succeeded in finding forms of coexistence and survival within the respective national states that arose on their territories.

The contemporary indigenous population in Brazil is roughly estimated at 250,000 individuals distributed among nearly 200 different ethnic groups that inhabit diverse ecological areas and speak more than 170 languages. They are what is left of a great population that numbered an estimated 5,000,000 individuals in 1500 when the Portuguese arrived in Brazil.

There is extreme diversity among the indigenous societies of Brazil: they have experienced different histories and possess their own unique cultural traditions. These societies of the South American lowlands are characterized by the absence of State. They consist of small demographic groups whose basic survival depends on hunting, fishing, the collection of natural products and subsistence farming.

Another factor explaining the diversity of these indigenous societies is the difference in the extent of contact they have experienced with segments of Brazilian society. A certain number of indigenous groups have maintained contact with the white population for more than 300 years, but there are still some groups in the Amazon regions that have never had any contact whatever.

Whereas in some countries on the American continent indigenous peoples constitute the major part of the population, in Brazil today they represent a mere 0.01% of the total population. Although the group is small, it has registered a steady rise in numbers over the past years.

The indigenous groups have realized that despite their cultural differences, they share a common history of exploitation and violation

of their more elementary rights. Since they have become aware of the possibility of building a common indigenous identity, those groups have organized themselves and have become more active on Brazil's national political scene.

### **The traditionally oral societies and written language**

A common characteristic of the indigenous societies of Brazil is the oral transmission of knowledge. Such societies possess traditional processes of socialization and learning through which the cultural heritage of the group is reproduced and transmitted from generation to generation. Accordingly, education for these societies consists in how the members of a certain group socialize the next generations, moulding them according to their visions of human nature and perpetuating those visions through their descendants.

This cultural heritage is transmitted orally by means of language that employs combinations of sounds to communicate certain meanings, functioning at the same time as a code and convention. Still, it is not possible to reduce such communication to the mere concept of orality, considering that the economic, social, political and religious practices of these indigenous societies develop other systems of communication transcending the use of the word.

In this way the transmission of knowledge in the traditionally oral societies is incorporated within a broader process and in this sense the traditional socialization practices in effect constitute **educational practices**.

Accordingly, indigenous education is a global process, every aspect of which is inherent in all that is characteristic of the indigenous groups of Brazil. Those aspects focus on the processes and conditions for the transmission of culture, the nature of the

knowledge transmitted and the functions of the education in the societal order of each community (Fernandes, 1964: 17).

## School education

Strictly indigenous education, which consists of the different traditional processes of socialization peculiar to each indigenous nation, stands in contradiction to formal school education, a notion introduced by white men in certain situations of interethnic contact.

In general it is precisely through the process of formal schooling that written language is disseminated among indigenous societies. In the great majority of cases, school is accordingly responsible for the spread in agrarian societies of the written word with its rules and techniques. Various authors have already elaborated on the impact of written language on traditionally oral societies (Goody and Oxenham inter alia), but it is important to emphasize that schooling involves much more than just reading and writing.

The desire to educate the «indio» according to our educational patterns became more defined when the desire to submit him to the process of «civilization» was converted into the central element of the dominant ideology in the Portuguese colonies (cf. Fernandes, 1975: 25). The Jesuits, the first agents of colonization, concentrated their efforts on destroying the influence of the elders by imposing a certain type of school that at the same time was an instrument of colonization and the negation of indigenous culture.

The Indian Protection Service («Servicio de Protección de los Indios» SPI), a federal agency established in 1910 to support the indigenous peoples, and its successor organized in 1967, the National Indian Foundation, («Fundación Nacional del Indio» FUNAI), did not mean the elaboration of a national policy on indigenous education nor the creation of a school valuing indigenous cultures.

## Indigenous rights and the new Brazilian constitution

When Brazil's National Congress ratified the country's new constitution on October 5, 1988, new rights were established for indigenous people.

The most important consequence of the constitution, one that broke with a tradition of Brazilian legislation, was the abandonment of the integrationist policy that persistently strove to assimilate the indigenous people within the «national community», viewing them as a transitory ethnic and social category condemned to disappearance. The new text guarantees indigenous people the right to be different by recognizing their social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions. It acknowledges the original rights of the indigenous people to the lands they occupy based on the historical fact of their presence on that land prior to the formation of the Brazilian State, and it guarantees them the exclusive use of the natural resources existing within their territories. The National Congress has taken up a new stance on indigenous policy, terminating the monopoly formerly exercised by the government's executive organs. The new text ensures the indigenous peoples, their communities and organizations the legal power to decide on matters concerning their own rights and interests, and appoints the Ministry of Public Affairs to accompany legal procedures involving indigenous rights and interests, acting in their defense. All such proceedings are under exclusive jurisdiction of the federal judiciary system.

Article 210 of Chapter III, which regulates «Education, Culture and Sport», provides that «primary education shall be administered in the Portuguese language, and indigenous communities shall moreover be guaranteed the right to use their maternal languages and employ their own particular educational processes». According to it is the State's constitutional obligation to ensure and fortify indigenous education, principally as concerns formal school education.

Indigenous school education never constituted a priority of those services. As yet, no effective program has been developed by the Federal Government for the protection of the indigenous population.

The Brazilian government has been exempting itself of its responsibilities towards the indigenous nations by signing contracts with religious missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) as well as a large number of other propagators of the faith, permitting them to conduct activities in indigenous areas throughout the country mainly in the sectors of formal education, medical assistance and economic development. It is the main object of some of these religious groups to translate the Bible into indigenous languages in order to bring the «Word of God» to peoples who »need salvation« (cf. Monserrat, 1989: 246-247). Formal schooling thus provides those missionaries with an important instrument of proselytism.

In this context, the schools run by the State in indigenous territories (through FUNAI and departments of education) or by the religious missionaries never honoured the right of those societies to have an educational system distinctly designed to respect their sociocultural traditions. The inadequate content of the curricula, the imposition of values and customs alien to the groups, the lack of relevant didactic material, the inferior training levels of the teachers, the inconsistency between the school calendar and the rhythm of indigenous life, the obligatory use of Portuguese, the negation of the values and cultural practices of those groups — all these factors have meant that formal education as provided by such schools does not comply with indigenous aspirations in that connection.

The new Brazilian Constitution adopted in 1988 represented the consolidation of a series of important and fundamental rights guaranteeing the survival of the Indigenous Nations of Brazil. Among other things, it ensured them the use of their own lan-

guages and teaching processes, making the State responsible for the protection of the manifestations of the indigenous cultures.

Although in Brazil there is a great gulf between established legislation and what occurs in practice, it is possible under the constitution to keep school from being used as an instrument to impose the cultural values of the dominant society, and to ensure that it becomes a means for the people to value their own indigenous cultures and to comprehend the broader and more complex reality that includes them since their contact with the white race.

The indigenous movement and the non-governmental organizations that assist the indigenous people and that actively participated in the entire constitutional process, submitting proposals and claiming rights, are now dedicated to the task of fulfilling those new rights.

### Non-government organizations

The encounters on indigenous education taking place in Brazil since the end of the 1970s that have been promoted by non-governmental organizations acting in defense of indigenous interests, have led to concrete proposals on ways of thinking about and dealing with the question of formal education for the indigenous peoples of Brazil.

The greater part of those organizations emerged in the midst of reaction against the military government's »false emancipation« project directed at the indigenous peoples in 1979. It was a time of political openness in Brazil, when various civil movements were being organized to address questions such as human rights, political amnesty and trade unions.



When the process was initiated at the end of the 70s, the civil organizations assisting the indigenous people brought together a heterogeneous group of professionals who acted in diverse sectors. By the end of the 80s those organizations had specialized and become more professional. They became active in providing health services, elaborating economic projects, offering legal assistance and developing projects of formal education.

Within that framework, various »alternative« educational projects situated in different regions of Brazil have been elaborated by such entities with the regular participation of the affected indigenous communities.

From the experience of practice, such organizations have been formulating proposals on formal education for the indigenous population. Those proposals basically focus on the specialized training of indigenous teachers, the development of curricula, programs and evaluation processes for flexible learning, as well as academic calendars coinciding with the rhythm of local life, and the systematic publication, both in native languages and Portuguese, of didactic materials containing scientific and cultural information relevant to the respective group and seeking to revitalize and preserve the body of traditional knowledge belonging to the indigenous groups with deference to the cognitive development of the learners, as well as the traditional teaching and learning processes of every single people (cf. Documento Bonde, 1989).

### The organized indigenous movement

The organized indigenous movement of Brazil has been playing an active role on the national political arena. Its claims in respect of indigenous education not only embrace the aforementioned points, but also an aspect fundamental to the treatment of this question:

## Conference of Indigenous Teachers

The »Second Conference of Indigenous Teachers from Amazonas and Roraima« was held in the city of Manaus (in the State of Amazonas) from the 11th to the 14th of July, 1989. It was attended by 24 teachers and 12 indigenous organizations from the Amazon region representing 73 indigenous peoples of Brazil. At the conclusion of the conference, the Indians elaborated a document that was sent to the senators and federal congressmen to serve as a basis for the new »Statute on the Guidelines and Foundations of National Education« that is currently being deliberated before the National Congress. The main points of that document are printed below:

- The schools we require must relate to the culture of each people respecting the customs, traditions, languages and beliefs of the indigenous nations.
- Indigenous organizations and leaders should participate in decisions related to schools.
- Schools must be critical and transforming in defense of our rights. It is important that indigenous schools be recognized at the federal level.
- Teachers of indigenous schools should be indigenous. All teachers should have the right to provide bilingual instruction. (...)
- Didactic material should be bilingual. The State must guarantee the funds required to elaborate such material.
- The curricula of the schools should be elaborated together with the indigenous communities, organizations and leaders who can rely on the assistance of public or non-governmental agencies at the discretion of the indigenous peoples.
- The academic calendar must respect the life style of each indigenous nation.
- The State is obliged to provide the funds necessary to create and maintain our schools, to contract and pay teachers, supervisors, academic coordinators and other school related personnel. Moreover, the State is obliged to provide the funds necessary to conduct investigations in support of indigenous education.

**that the indigenous communities be the authors and administrators of their own processes of formal education.**

In other words, it is the task of the indigenous communities themselves to formulate and implement the integrated teaching and evaluation programs defined in accordance with their demands. The indigenous organizations are now demanding the Brazilian authorities to guarantee the development of such programs under the national education system by fulfilling their claim for bilingual formal education for indigenous communities, and by treating their unique sociocultural characteristics with due regard and respect.

Today there are indigenous organizations that promote regional conferences on formal education throughout the country. Indigenous educators from the States of Amazonas, Roraima and Acre (in the northern section of Brazil), for example, have been organizing annual assemblies since 1988, to discuss common problems involved in the administration of their own schools.

Another significant indigenous initiative relating to formal education, this time at the university level, is being conducted by the Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI), an organization that has brought together diverse indigenous communities in Brazil in the elaboration of a »Special Program of Training and Support for Research of Indigenous Communities«. The program in question aims to promote integration between scientific knowledge proceeding from universities or specialized research centers, and traditional indigenous practices of environmental management. This program entails the establishment of an indigenous research center for the development of »pilot projects« in a number of indigenous territories, and relies on the support of the Catholic University of Goiás. Since 1989, ten indigenous scholars have been studying law and biology at that university.

## Indigenous schools

*»We, the Juruna People, need schooling, to comprehend the life of the white man, the way he lives, his laws. If we do not acquaint ourselves with the life of the white man, he will deceive us. But the indio is intelligent. He can think as well as the white man. For that reason we want to learn more about everything. For that reason we need school taught by Juruna teachers. But we need help (...) to assist us in creating a school for the indio, in making books for the indio, in training teachers. Then we will be able to make improvements for ourselves.« (Carandine Juruna — Chief of the Aldea Tuba-Tuba of the Juruna Nation, Indigenous Reserve of Xingu, 28. 02. 1990).*

The rights secured recently by the indigenous communities under the new constitution are proof that the indigenous movement has become an important social lever. Academic investigations enumerating their contemporary demands are a contribution of the scientific community aiding that cause. Those investigations must serve as the common patrimony of indigenous populations.

In reference to formal education, careful reflection must be given to the unique processes of socialization of the indigenous communities insofar as concerns their educational practices since these can serve to undergird specific pedagogical activities. In order for formal education to be based on indigenous educational practices, it will be necessary to compile information on the traditional processes of socialization. That will involve the systematic study of the processes and conditions under which the indigenous cultural heritage is transmitted.

Only from the moment indigenous schools are built on the basis of their own cultures will they become truly indigenous. that is to say under the management and administration of the communities they serve.

This is the main claim of the indigenous groups of Brazil insofar as concerns formal education, and the goal that we must support by taking concrete action in that direction.

**Documents**

1989 — De Educação Indígena — Bonde

1989 — Propostas dos Professores Indígenas do Amazonas e Roraima sobre Educação Indígena — Manaus (11 a 14 de julho)

1989 — Primeiro Encontro Estadual de Educação Indígena — Mato Grosso (7 a 11 maio)



*1993 was declared by the UN as the »International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples« (IYWIP). Barrie Brennan sees his comments on this subject as an impulse to encourage discussion on indigenous learning, the link between culture, language and learning. The manuscript was first printed in a Report of the ASPBAE Sub-Region 4 Conference on Literacy, Apia, Western Samoa, 19th - 23rd of April, 1993. Barrie Brennan is a member of the staff of the Department of Administrative, Higher and Adult Education Studies, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia.*

**Barrie Brennan**

**Literacy, language and the International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples**

In 1993 the International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples (IYWIP), it is expected by the UN, the sponsors of the year, that action will take place by, and on behalf of, the world's indigenous peoples. In relation to the question of literacy, an area in which action may be expected to take place, there are a number of key pro-