

THE ROLE OF THE INDIGENOUS TEACHER

O PAPEL DO PROFESSOR INDÍGENA

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges of developing culturally relevant pedagogical practices in Indigenous schools, focusing on the tensions between traditional knowledge systems and imposed educational models. Through the lens of Tuxá Indigenous educators in Bahia, Brazil, we analyze how teachers navigate curricular planning while resisting colonial frameworks that marginalize Indigenous epistemologies. The study highlights efforts to create intercultural, community-based schooling that honors ancestral traditions while engaging strategically with non-Indigenous knowledge. Using the Tuxá people's historical displacement by the Itaparica Dam as context, we explore how land dispossession intensifies educational decolonization struggles. Findings reveal that effective Indigenous pedagogy requires: (1) collective planning rooted in community values, (2) critical adaptation of bureaucratic requirements, and (3) curricular autonomy to reflect cosmological worldviews. The research underscores Indigenous teachers' dual role as educators and cultural activists, particularly in post-displacement contexts where schools become vital sites for cultural preservation.

Keywords: Indigenous Education; Decolonial Pedagogy; Intercultural Schooling.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os desafios de desenvolver práticas pedagógicas culturalmente relevantes em escolas indígenas, focando nas tensões entre saberes tradicionais e modelos educacionais impostos. Através da perspectiva de educadores Tuxá na Bahia, examinamos como professores conciliam planejamento curricular com a resistência a estruturas coloniais que marginalizam epistemologias indígenas. O estudo destaca esforços para criar uma escolarização intercultural e comunitária que valorize tradições ancestrais enquanto dialoga criticamente com conhecimentos não-indígenas. Utilizando o deslocamento histórico dos Tuxá pela barragem de Itaparica como contexto, exploramos como a perda territorial intensifica as lutas por descolonização educacional. Os resultados revelam que uma pedagogia indígena efetiva requer: (1) planejamento coletivo enraizado em valores comunitários, (2) adaptação crítica de exigências burocráticas, e (3) autonomia curricular para refletir cosmovisões indígenas. A pesquisa evidencia o duplo papel dos professores indígenas como educadores e ativistas culturais, especialmente em contextos pós-deslocamento onde as escolas se tornam espaços vitais de preservação cultural.

Palavras-chave: Educação Indígena; Pedagogia Decolonial; Escolarização Intercultural.

Understanding the historical context of Indigenous schooling, in an effort to comprehend and improve teaching practices, reflects the very challenges faced by Indigenous teachers when tasked with lesson planning and student assessment. It is recognized that the school is one of the key spaces for sustaining the process of cultural tradition and the expression of knowledge. Thus, the difficulty in developing didactic-pedagogical strategies in the

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classroom has been a concern for Indigenous teachers, who have sought to take ownership of planning in an effort to enhance the teaching and learning process—aiming to preserve and maintain Indigenous culture.

After all, it is in schools that both Indigenous rights to a specific, quality education and the very concept of schooling as a means of access to information are debated—for Indigenous peoples in their relations with non-Indigenous society and in their integration into Brazilian society. Above all, schools must be autonomous, a space for cultural empowerment.

Victims of the colonizing framework of Indigenous education, which still negatively impacts Indigenous schools today, teachers strive to dismantle deep-rooted prejudices and rewrite the history of Indigenous schooling. We understand that the non-Indigenous way of conceptualizing education is neither the only nor the best way to define its meaning and importance in the world. For us, the best education is one that represents who we are, how we live, what we value, and what we desire for our people. From our worldview and lived experiences within the community, we believe the best education is one where people feel recognized within their own cultural framework. We see that it is essential not to deny our customs, our histories.

To this end, we strive to build an education that upholds these principles—what we are calling intercultural and community-based Indigenous schooling, *or* specific and differentiated education. The stories written and lived by us, passed down through generations, ensure the continuity of our history by protecting Indigenous peoples and fostering understanding and appreciation of our cultures. But how can we ensure that schools also fulfill this role? The role of embracing a worldview that meets the learning needs of our students—who, as Indigenous people, believe in the importance of valuing life and the cosmological world, yet also understand the necessity of engaging with non-Indigenous knowledge and tools for their own survival?

The challenge we raise here is: what kind of planning should we develop in Indigenous schools? Who is this Indigenous teacher responsible for carrying out this planning? What training do they have for pedagogical work in Indigenous schools? Is Indigenous teaching practice truly aligned with the interests of their community, or is it merely replicating the pedagogical approaches dictated by textbooks imposed by State and Municipal Education

Departments? Does Indigenous pedagogy have its own distinct characteristics, or is it analogous to the prevailing educational system in our country?

The first step in thinking through all of this is to become familiar with the school's Political-Pedagogical Project, to find out whether its political and pedagogical principles reflect the social dynamics of the community; whether the curriculum framework and the subjects within it meet the needs of the community; whether the content aligns with the principles of an Indigenous school. Only after this analysis should we begin to think about planning. Still, we continue to question and problematize: What kind of planning? How, where, and when should this planning take place? Who should be involved in the planning? What approaches should be included? How often should planning occur?

These questions are part of the systemic planning that we consider fundamental for the effective organization of pedagogical practice and assessment in Indigenous schools. Indigenous Pedagogy, the classroom practices within Indigenous schools, and their epistemological foundations shape the teaching practice in these specific educational contexts. We must not lose sight of the fact that the influence of non-Indigenous educational pedagogy on Indigenous pedagogy remains significant—evident, for example, in the methodological processes imposed on Indigenous teachers through the use of textbooks.

However, Indigenous teachers have been actively working to create specific didactic-pedagogical strategies that allow them some freedom from this subordination to traditional Brazilian education. Being an Indigenous teacher makes a significant difference in this educational context. Their knowledge of traditional cultural and linguistic practices, their ways of relating to the environment and conceiving the world within their specific contexts, all contribute to an intercultural teaching approach.

While planning is crucial to any teaching practice, regardless of the educational model or school type, it is even more challenging in Indigenous schools. Why do we say this? Because in Indigenous schools, even though the principles that guide them are well established, everything is still very new. The curriculum is new, the educational projects are new, the pedagogical practices are new—and even the teachers are new. It is these teachers who are shaping the conception and structure of Indigenous education. In other words, everything is still under construction.

And this construction is taking place collectively—a collective way of thinking and doing that occurs especially during the school’s pedagogical planning sessions, where teachers and community members work together. When an Indigenous teacher is part of their community’s school, they are more than just a teacher; they are also a mentor/activist in service of the empowerment of their students. Their teaching practice must be planned collectively, respecting the values and principles of the community in which the school is embedded and the legal instruments established by the specific Indigenous school.

Administrative and bureaucratic tasks must indeed be carried out. However, these should not be the sole measures used to assess the teacher’s competence or the legitimacy of their practice. What is at stake today is documentation—as a mechanism for valuing, preserving, and serving as a source of research for their people. Today, planning is not just a responsibility of the teacher or the school as a whole; it is also a demand of Indigenous peoples, extending beyond the classroom since the *memory* of Indigenous cultures, ancestral traditions, and socioeconomic structures guides the very conception of Indigenous school education.

Thus, planning must embrace and recognize the daily experiences of the community in which the school operates. It must evaluate teaching practices, be reflective, revisit practices as needed—whether successful or not—reconsider available data, revise, seek new meanings, and more. Planning also involves adopting an attentive posture—carefully analyzing everything that requires a systemic view by the school team. Within this process, the teaching plan is also built, and it must be understood as a guiding instrument for the teacher’s work, grounded in the political-pedagogical competence of the Indigenous teacher, with full clarity and assurance regarding what is written in the plan.

However, the greatest challenge for the Indigenous teacher is to break free from a system that imprisons, that fails to respect specific cultural realities, that distances the school from the lived experiences of its students and from the true purposes agreed upon by members of the Indigenous community. The real task is to build an autonomous school education—one in which the Indigenous school has greater freedom to structure its own curriculum, putting into practice the conception of an intercultural, specific, and differentiated Indigenous school. Yet, despite the difficulties imposed by the mainstream education system, we have managed to create a school education in our own way—grounded in the everyday reality of our schools.

Brief History of the Tuxá People

The Tuxá, who call themselves the “*Proká Caboclo Nation of Bow, Arrow, and Maraká*,” lived according to their beliefs and customs until 1987 in the village of Rodelas, a municipality in northern Bahia, in the sub-middle São Francisco region, bordering the state of Pernambuco. After that year, the *Tuxá* community experienced an irreparable tragedy that marked the lives of every Indigenous individual.

The presence of the São Francisco Hydroelectric Company (CHESF), focused solely on its own progress, led to the construction of the Itaparica Dam, which affected eight municipalities in Bahia and Pernambuco—including Rodelas. With the imminent flooding of their village, the community was completely uprooted, and its people were forced to split up to avoid perishing beneath the river’s waters. They had to abandon their homes on a predetermined day and time.

Part of the population chose to be resettled in the municipality of Ibotirama, Bahia, approximately 1,050 km away from their ancestral village. The other part of the community opted to remain on higher ground in Rodelas, in a place where their people had once lived in the past—close to their cultural roots. This site is now known as the Aldeia-Mãe (Mother Village).

The *Tuxá* village is located in northern Bahia, 560 km from the state capital, east of BR-116, which connects to the town of Rodelas. Following the São Francisco River upstream leads to Barra do Tarrachil in the municipality of Chorrochó, while downstream lies the city of Glória and, further ahead, Paulo Afonso—all situated in Bahia. To the west, the village borders the banks of the São Francisco River.



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