

Training indigenous teachers in the Amazon region in Brazil (Acre State)

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Abstract

The indigenous education in Brazil incorporates important elements of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the United Nations. The social and cultural organization of Brazilian indigenous peoples is reflected in rights struggles, and in the indigenous school. In Acre, intercultural curriculum in the training of indigenous teachers precedes public policies for indigenous education in Brazil. The present study relates to an Indigenous Teachers Training Course, which is developed by the Indigenous Education Coordination of the State Education Department and that took place in Acre. The cultural and linguistic complexity that involves the formation of indigenous teachers was an element in the teacher's pedagogic practice applied in the debates in the classroom over the course.

Keywords: Education; Brazil incorporates, United Nations

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was approved by the United Nations—UN—on 13 September 2007, after 22 years of claims about it. Although it was a major achievement, the history of this document is recent; especially if one takes under consideration that these peoples' social and cultural organisation goes back to centuries before societies, as they are currently known.

The document recognises indigenous peoples' individual and collective rights, as well as their right to culture, identity, education, health, employment and *language*, among others. It also states that indigenous peoples and individuals have the right *not to be forcibly assimilated or deprived of their cultures*.

In Brazil, important elements of the UN Declaration were incorporated into the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. During this period, education was one of the prior action plans applied to the national legislation and to public policies related to indigenous peoples (Caplaca, 1995; D'Angelis, 2000; Ferreira, 1992; 2001; Silva, 2000).

The differentiated education in Brazil, as well as the indigenous education, was recently developed in the Brazilian educational scenario. For more than 30 years, the indigenous education was limited to and protected by the National Indian Foundation—FUNAI—which is a specific federal organ.

During this period, the indigenous teacher's training aimed at bilingual literacy and mathematics. However, since 1991, the Ministry of Education and Sports—MEC—became responsible for coordinating indigenous education initiatives (Monte, 2000).

Several local-nature initiatives have become reference in the conceptualisation and implementation of indigenous education public policies based on specificity, difference, interculturality and linguistic diversity valuation paradigms (MEC, 1993; 1998; 1999).

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Acre State, specifically, has an important history of indigenous teachers training, which is represented by the actions of the non-governmental organisation called Pro-Indigenous Commission (Comissao Pro-Indio)—CPI/AC. Indigenous teachers training courses were structured on an ongoing basis and trained bilingual monitors.

The new proposals aimed at respecting the indigenous societies' linguistic aspects. Such concept started being ruled by the Constitution in Brazil since 1988. These projects were focused on training indigenous young individuals who were chosen to play leadership roles within the community and on enabling them to manage organised cooperatives in charge of indigenous health and education, as well as of struggling for indigenous lands attainment and management (Monte, 2000).

Indigenous teachers leading role in the Amazon region (Acre, Amazonas and Roraima States) had a strong impact on the development of indigenous education policies, since, historically, schools were one of the main instruments used to mischaracterise and destroy the indigenous cultures (Silva, 1999).

Nowadays, education became increasingly geared towards homogenisation and globalisation. However, it is possible to see that Amazon indigenous teachers advocate for the school by giving new meaning and value to it. They do not simply accept our model but use the school environment as a resistance strategy (Silva, 1999).

1.1. *The indigenous teachers' training course—CFDI in Acre State, Brazil*

Indigenous teachers training in Acre was developed by the Indigenous Education Coordination of the State Education Department—SEE. It is noteworthy that Acre is the only State in Brazil keeping a training programme that benefits all indigenous peoples and that respects these peoples' differences

and ethnic groups. The education provided to Acre indigenous populations meets all the current community demands from kindergarten to high school (Martini & Jaminawa, 2010).

The present study was conducted during the 2009 first school semester at the Indigenous Teachers Training Course—CFDI, Federal University of Acre (UFAC) in Cruzeiro do Sul County (Figure 1). It comprised a group of students from different ethnic groups in Acre State (Kaxinawa, Ashenika, Yawanawa, Poyanawa, Shanandawa, Manchineri, Jaminawa and Katukina) and one female student from Marubos indigenous village, which ethnicity is allocated in Amazonas State.

Indigenous students' age in the sampling group was heterogeneous since the villages only chose leaders to attend the course. These leaders are the elementary school teachers in their villages and they teach the early grades to provide bilingual literacy to the children. Elderly individuals, or sons and daughters of former 'caciques' (tribal chiefs), or even heads of large families may be chosen as leaders. Thus, the group consisted of women and men in all age groups.

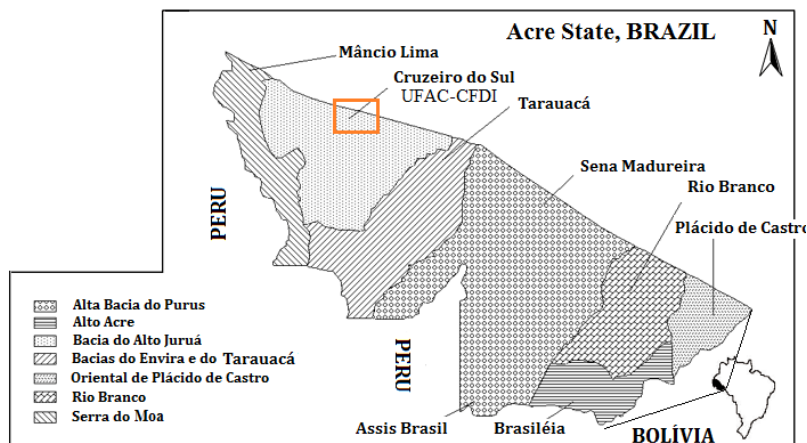


Figure 1. Regional geopolitical division based on the valleys formed by the big rivers crossing Acre State, Amazon Forest, Brazil.

The intercultural curriculum adopted by the indigenous teachers' training in Acre is featured as the previous reference to indigenous education political and pedagogical practices in Brazil. According to these teachers' perspective, the school curriculum is a significant communication and intercultural social action. Curricula are historical—meaning—construction processes, which involve teaching-learning relationships at school (Monte, 2000).

In fact, this training requires a different curriculum. Therefore, these teachers' training must be associated with projects conducted by universities, non-governmental organisations and State departments. These institutions usually define teachers' training based on open or under-construction curricula (Martini & Jaminawa, 2010).

CFDI is a 4-year long course structured in modules called 'attendance phase' and 'intermediate phase'. During the attendance phase, students travel from their villages to Cruzeiro do Sul County; they are hosted by UFAAC and attend full-time classes for 2 months.

The theoretical subjects are taught during the attendance phase, which takes from 7 to 15 days, depending on the workload. During the lectures, the teacher works with the students and teaches them all the theoretical contents suggested by the educational programmes. Evaluations were performed during the attendance phase to check whether the students passed or failed in the tests.

Each attendance phase is followed by an intermediate phase. CFDI-UFAC teachers travel to the indigenous villages during the intermediate phase; they go alone or in groups to perform collective efforts focused on student/teacher teaching activities in their villages.

During the fourth, fifth and sixth semesters, students have to choose one of the following fields: Social Sciences and Humanities, Natural Sciences or Arts and Language. After the course is finished, the indigenous students get an intercultural degree.

2. Methodological approaches to overcome cultural complexity and language barriers; and the teacher's observer role

The indigenous population in Acre is represented by 16 peoples, namely, Ashaninka, Katukina, Poyanawa, Madija, Manchineri, Jaminawa, Kaxinawa, Nawa, Nukini, Yawanawa, Apolima, Kaxarari, Shanenawa and Arara. Fourteen officially known peoples, out of the 16, have contact with the white society (naua). However, there are peoples called 'emerging' or 'resurrected' that remained unknown for a very long time or that were considered extinct (Ochoa, Iglesias & Teixeira, 2003).

Acre still holds Indians who have no contact with outsiders, and who are known as 'withdrawn' or 'isolated'. There is little or no information about these isolated Indians and this is the reason why their customs, culture and language are unknown.

One of the main educational goals is the possibility of having school teaching as a way to preserve the specific socio-cultural background from each ethnic group. Hence, this is the importance of having a bilingual indigenous education, preferably provided by indigenous teachers in indigenous schools built in the villages, using curriculum programmes defined by the communities themselves.

Thus, indigenous teachers' training activities should focus on identifying teaching practices able to address student's culture and knowledge through topics that comprise the school subject's content.

Besides dealing with cultural complexity, professors working in college courses, which were developed to train indigenous teachers, also have to deal with the students' native language. It requires the adjustment of terms used in the classroom because these students, after their graduation, shall teach in Portuguese and in their native language, back in their villages.

Some studies indicate that approximately 718 languages are spoken throughout the Amazon region, although some researchers believe that this number may be much bigger (Ochoa et al., 2003). Currently, there are at least 156 indigenous languages being spoken in the Amazon region, although those spoken by resurrected or isolated indigenous peoples are not herein taken under consideration.

According to linguistic studies, indigenous languages are similar to each other. They are grouped in the same family and, whenever they show a genetic link, they are grouped in a common core. There are three language families in Acre State, namely, *Arwak*, *Arawa* and *Pano*.

The links among languages spoken by ethnic groups from Acre may be exemplified by a schematic representation in which the 'leaves' are language associations; the 'branches' are 'language families' formed by similar languages and the 'trunk' is formed by the related families (Figure 2).

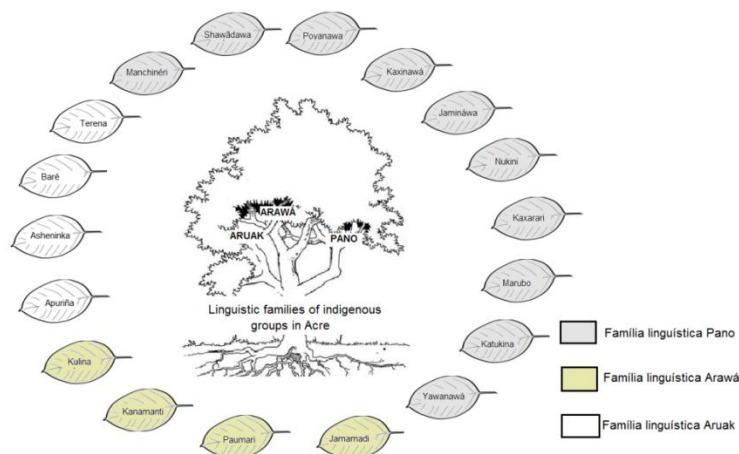


Figure 2. Schematic representation of language families found in Acre and in other Amazonian States (adapted from Ochoa et al., 2003).

Curt Nimuendaju (Neves, 2002) performed an ethnological analysis of indigenous land occupation in Acre. His analysis allowed setting an analogy between territorial occupation and the spoken languages (Table 1). It is based on the five major language groups (trunks) occupying the valleys formed by the big rivers (Imbernon, 2012).

It is worth emphasizing that the simple language division of native groups found in Acre over the last 5,000 years does not reflect the wide variety of indigenous cultures and the complex territoriality established by tribal alliances and rivalries. One should also take under consideration that there is little or no information about the isolated Indians and, therefore, their language is still unknown.

The indigenous students in Jurua Valley—where CDFI is located—speak Portuguese and Spanish, besides their native language, due to their proximity to Peru. However, most students just speak their native language, which is a barrier to be transposed by CDFI professors throughout these students training.

Thus, the ‘word’ was adopted in the classroom as the articulating element in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, the process was not driven by the teacher but by the students’ culture and language.

One may say, ‘the essence of culture, i.e., the way one lives, is not learnt from school but from the family’ (Forquin, 1993). It means that super valuating school education at the expense of family education may corrupt one’s culture (Vinnya, 2007).

It implies that the contents of disciplines taught to the indigenous students’ group should result from the selection done within the indigenous culture. Accordingly, there must be a close relationship between school knowledge and the knowledge of local communities in the work conducted within the classroom.

The theme set for debate in the Laws and Land Rights discipline was land value. ‘Word’ was the structuring element in the classroom. Students from different ethnic groups defined the meanings of ‘value’ and ‘land’ in Portuguese and in their native language.

Table 1. Geographical location of indigenous groups in Acre State river basins: language, family and cultural relations (adapted from Neves, 2002).

Language	Trunk	Cultural location/features
Aruak	Aruak	Found in the mid-course of Purus River, currently in Amazonas State. Groups commonly subdued by other stronger groups took refuge in dry lands and spread to several tributaries in both mid-Purus riversides. The Jamamadi and the Kamadeni, as well as many other extinct peoples, were among the different groups within this region. Recent

		analyses done by linguists attribute approximately 2,000 years to this family. Found in the upper course of Purus River and in the lower Acre River. By going up these rivers, from North to South, it was possible to find the following peoples: Apurina, Manchineri, Kulina, Canamari, Piros and Ashaninka, among others. These groups spread from the Pauini and Purus rivers confluence to the Andes eastern slopes approximately 5,000 years ago. Pre-History shows that long before resisting the advance of white men on their land, the Arawak or Antis—as the Inca people called them—had already successfully resisted the arrival of Pano language speakers and the expansion of the Andean civilisations.
	Aruak	
Takana	Pano	Found in the upper course of Acre River, high Iquiri, Abuna and other Madeira River tributaries in the Bolivian territory. Some of them are very pugnacious, such as the feared Pacaguara. Others are more sociable, such as the Kaxarari, since they kept active contact with the Apurina, despite the language and cultural differences between them. Even though belonging to the Pano language branch, the Takana language origin is more recent, since it emerged between 3,000 and 2,000 years ago.
	Pano	Found in the intermediate region between the mid-course of Purus and Jurua Rivers, North of Acre. Some of these groups’ features indicate relatively recent emergence, approximately 2,000 years ago. These little numerous groups were surrounded by the Arawak peoples—to the east—and by the Pano ones—to the west. Thus, they had to exploit the drylands, which were less rich in food supply than the margins of large rivers.
Katukina	Pano	Found in much of the mid and upper courses of Jurua River and in most of its tributaries—such as Tarauaca, Muru, Envira, Moa and the entire region. Kaxinawa, Jaminawa, Amahuaca, Arara, Rununawa, Xixinawa and many other tribal names are all part of a very old language branch—with approximately 5,000 years. This branch originated in another region and more recently invaded Acre territory. The Pano pugnacious nature allowed them to conquering their territory through war against different-language-speaker tribes and against groups from the same trunk. It partly explains the high fragmentation showed by many Pano tribes when white people finally got to the region.

3. Results and discussions

Professors’ leading role in the knowledge of discipline contents related to indigenous teachers’ training should be focused on keeping cultural and language relations with indigenous students within the classroom.

Thus, whenever a given content (theme) is discussed, a dialogue between the indigenous students’ group and the teacher is set. Each ethnic group identifies the ‘words’ in their native language that best translate the debate in the classroom.

The students form groups based on ethnicity and each ethnic group is named by words in their own native language. Next, they are asked to debate the theme and to make a brief report to the other classmates and to the teacher. Table 2 summarises the ideas and observations from debates done by the teacher.

Table 2. Ideas and observations from debates done by the teacher.

Group name (ethnicity)	Meaning	Observations made by the students in the group
Katato and Yube (manchineri and hunikui)	Note: the students in this group wanted to write the words in the native language of all ethnic groups:	According to this group, the wild animals are the real landowners and those who take care of the land without looking for profits are really qualified to own it, because every living being may be considered to be a landowner. There are those who take care and those who exploit the land, for we are all owners <i>and the land is the only</i>

Bepekuru and Mapuelo (kaxinawa and manchineri)	Butterfly and Boa	<p><i>inheritance that our children will receive.</i> The group mentions that <i>we indigenous peoples own the land by right, by the inheritance coming from the first inhabitants who used it wisely and this same wisdom has been used by these peoples so far.</i> According to this group, land purchase does not imply ownership; <i>the land encompasses culture, ancestors, past lives, untapped riches and, especially, the history of peoples.</i> In addition to the cultural value, they also mentioned the value of life, the value of the bloodshed to protect the forest (material and spiritual food source).</p>
Professor's Note		<p>According to this group, the land has an immense spiritual value, which is reflected on the myths, beliefs, life stories and on the way Indians seek to explain the <i>indigenous science</i> mysteries. They quote their ancestors' motto, <i>Our land is our life</i>, which still persists in the current culture of their peoples. They say that they would die to protect their land because there would have no more life without it. This group has a strong feeling about the national and international pressure on the lands occupied by Indians in the Amazon, which they believe is related to progress. According to the group's vision, progress aims only to sacrifice the forest.</p>
Xiña Bena (Yawanawá)	<p>They all have the same ethnicity; they are indigenous teachers in their villages; Some of them represented Amazon indigenous peoples in other countries: New thoughts</p>	<p>The group mentions that the indigenous reserves and lands belong to the Union by federal law, but they explain that <i>according to the indigenous viewpoint, the landowners are those who take care of and care for the land, the humans and all the living things that depend on it for survival.</i> Similarly, they emphasise that the land has great value to the Indians and that every living thing depends on it. There is a strong perception that those who <i>buy the land with money</i> (large landowners) <i>and explore it see themselves as owners.</i></p>
Professor's note		<p>There is a strong perception that those who <i>buy the land with money</i> (large landowners) <i>and explore it see themselves as owners.</i></p>
May Xinay Ihu (Yawanawa and Marubo)	Land thinkers	<p>This group points to a hierarchy by mentioning that the landowners <i>are all the living beings</i>; however, it explains that the human beings <i>lead over all others because they develop activities that other beings do not know and cannot develop or do.</i> According to the group, there is a consensus that the landowner is the one who uses, values, respects and preserves it. With regard to <i>respecting the land</i>, they refer to the ways of using the land and its resources. The group poses a question to be thought about: <i>And what is the value of land?</i> They conclude that the value of the land cannot be described because <i>it encompasses lives, lives that give life to other beings. It is like an entirely organised system because it has important components that demonstrate its valuation. These components are organised in their</i></p>

Professor's note		<i>environments and make it difficult to describe the value of the land.</i> The group posed a question to be thought about: <i>And what is the value of land?</i> They conclude that the value of the land cannot be described because <i>it encompasses lives, lives that give life to other beings. It is like an entirely organised system because it has important components that demonstrate its valuation. These components are organised in their environments and make it difficult to describe the value of the land.</i> The systemic perception of the environment is part of common sense in this group.
Hunikui and Ashenika (Kaxinawa and Ashenika)	Note: The group chose to name the components' ethnic groups. Kaxinawa and Ashenika	The group points out that all living beings own the land and the space they live in. <i>No one owns the land but our duty is to take care of it. The landowner is who lives in it, who takes cares of it and who uses the resources in a respectful way, according to their needs and without destroying it.</i> According to this group, the land has two owners, <i>the destroyer and the caregiver</i> , who preserves it. According to this group, the land value is very big but only those who live in it and take care of its resources know this value.
Professor's note		According to this group, the land value is very big but only those who live in it and take care of its resources know this value.
Yotsiikari and Meni	Composed by students with greater difficulty in understanding and writing in Portuguese. They failed to express themselves in Portuguese, but they showed drawings representing what they had done.	<i>We always use the natural resources according to the collective and family needs or to the alternative basic needs of the families, the village and of the people as a whole. When we use the forest resources, we always respect our wisdom, science and customs, by keeping the rules and origins or ancient cultures that relate the nature with the human being.</i>
Professor's note		This group links the forest use and occupation to the people's livelihood since their people get what they need to survive from the forest for generations.

A remarkable fact observed by the teacher concerns the dialogues and experience exchanges set by students. They have identified differences and similarities between their daily native languages, which have been used by their peoples for centuries.

It was observed that the proprietary mentality, which is one of the strongest mentalities in our society, is not found in the indigenous 'land value' concept. In fact, the *naua* (white) society cannot survive without the idea of property; we need the property; we need to 'own' something because who does not own something in the capitalist world is poor, homeless, landless, jobless and does not have dignity.

Thus, it was possible to see that, according to the indigenous students' perception, owning something is essential to the *nauas*. Indeed, we need to have formal knowledge in some science field

to get a job because those who do not have it do not get a job and, consequently, do not own anything: 'being' is only important if one can 'own' something.

Such perception is very clear to all ethnicities. Some students mentioned the *indigenous culture kidnapping*. This statement, made by Luis, a Yawanawa student, was totally supported in the classroom. The students reported the existence of cultural values losses. Teacher perceived the strong feeling shared by the students that *nauas* only approach indigenous peoples to absorb their knowledge about the forest.

4. Conclusions

The great challenge consists of thinking indigenous schools based on their limits and possibilities. Such thinking includes discipline contents associated with indigenous knowledge.

The desired interactions among students groups were accomplished, since each group debated its people, its language, i.e., a single theme, according to its village perspectives. In fact, after getting to a conclusion, the students compared and exchanged information with other groups, and it resulted in the collective experience acquired by a precious combination of narratives and texts.

It is worth highlighting that whenever the students do not completely understand the Portuguese language, they do their best to write the texts for display, and when they cannot fully reach this goal, they do so by drawing.

Respecting the students' knowledge is fundamental for the acquisition of new knowledge. Therefore, by taking the experiences and conceptions of each student and of each ethnic group under consideration, the herein adopted *praxis* set a starting point for the introduction of scientific contents, since it is done in such a way that the indigenous students' culture and traditional knowledge are included in the debates.

The learning environment is set as space where everyone has the opportunity to express ideas grounded in his/her culture and language. Thus, it allows breaking language barriers and reaching the expected goals.

Thus, the 'word' is an *essential factor* during the students' learning and development processes. The interaction expected by the professors would not be possible without it, because their goal changes depending on the path they feel connected to.

Nowadays school becomes an instrument placed on the hands of indigenous peoples to reconstruct and reaffirm identities. It is worth emphasising the words that summarised the 'land value' experiment which were said by the indigenous student Luis Yawanawa: '*white people (nauas) think that it is important to own the land, the indigenous peoples think that it is important to belong to the land*'.

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