

# Chapter 32 In Brief

**Milestones and challenges in the construction and expansion of participatory intercultural education in the Amazon**



Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental Santa Terezinha, na Comunidade de Piçatuba, Belterra  
(Foto: Fábio Zuker/Amazônia Real)



**THE AMAZON WE WANT**  
Science Panel for the Amazon

# Milestones and challenges in the construction and expansion of participatory intercultural education in the Amazon

Sandra Frieri<sup>a</sup>, Fernanda Bortolotto<sup>b</sup>, Gloria Amparo Rivera<sup>c</sup>, André Baniwa<sup>a, d</sup>, Clara van der Hammen<sup>e</sup>, Paulo Moutinho<sup>f</sup>

## Key Messages & Recommendations

- 1) The peoples of the Amazon have immense wealth in terms of cultural, historical, and ethnic diversity, reflected in their worldviews, knowledge systems, ways of life, and relationships and interdependence with nature. Thus, within the Amazonian context, intercultural education is an important means to facilitate encounters between diverse knowledge systems.
- 2) Despite Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs)' great knowledge, there is an epistemic violence in the development of contemporary educational and capacity-building processes.
- 3) Constructing participatory intercultural education implies that the parties not only have the possibility to express their visions, but are also open to other perspectives, knowledge systems, and practices. There is an urgent need to exchange experiences so that the strengthening of capacities generates inclusive learning spaces, connected with the territory and dialogued symbolic languages.
- 4) Creating intercultural education and linguistic policies might be achieved by strengthening local governance and political-administrative autonomy in the development of curricula, creating intercultural education proposals in the urban Amazon; creating bridges between primary, secondary, and tertiary education; and designing participatory curricular models with the possibility for technological innovation.

**Abstract** This chapter aims to give visibility to participatory intercultural education experiences across the Amazon region. It starts with an exam-

ination of the issues with the general educational system, and then presents case studies which offer different paths forward. These case studies reflect not only the importance of participatory education for IPLCs, but also how knowledge is itself a form of communication and political influence that helps IPLCs guarantee their rights.

**The asymmetry of the educational system** Colonial-style educational systems rarely aligned with diversity, here defined as equal access to wealth and opportunity. On the contrary, the trend towards sociocultural homogenization and curricular standardization started with colonial powers and remains the dominant model today. Educational policies, programs, and curricula seldomly recognize the diversity of knowledge systems, practices, and resources existent in Amazonian societies. This asymmetry is perhaps best illustrated by the practice of teaching exclusively in countries' national languages, the prohibition of teaching in other languages (e.g. Indigenous languages), and the adoption of a standardized model of knowledge content and transmission<sup>1</sup> which promotes national values above the deep knowledge constructed day-to-day in interactions with the territory. Power imbalances permeate individuals' daily lives, including through education systems which reinforce social asymmetry and symbolic violence, restrict the discourse of one in detriment to the greater legitimacy of the other, and evidence a 'monolingual and monocultural character'<sup>2</sup>.

**Understanding intercultural education and capacity building** Interculturality is usually understood as the construction of spaces for dialogue

<sup>a</sup> Fundación Tropenbos Colombia, Diagonal 46 No. 20-64, Bogotá, Colombia, sandra.frieri@uexternado.edu.co

<sup>b</sup> University of Brasília Sustainable Development Center (UnB), Darcy Ribeiro Gleba A, Asa Norte, Brasília DF 70297-400, Brazil

<sup>c</sup> National Training Service (SENA) Vaupés, Av. 15 No. 6 176, Mitú, Vaupés, Colombia

<sup>d</sup> Organização Indígena da Bacia do Içana. Rua Projetada 70, Centro São Gabriel da Cachoeira AM, Brazil

<sup>e</sup> Pontifical Xavierian University School of Social Sciences, Carrera 7 No. 40 62, Bogotá, Colombia

<sup>f</sup> Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM), Av. Nazaré 669, Centro, Belém PA 66040-145, Brazil

between different cultures and their equitable interaction to generate shared cultural expressions. This dialogue implies that the parties involved not only have the possibility to express their visions, but also have an openness to other perspectives, knowledge systems, and practices<sup>3</sup>. In the Amazon, the notion of interculturality supports the cultural and linguistic richness of different worldviews and ways of interacting with the natural environment (see Chapters 8-13).

Each one of the approximately 350 Indigenous groups<sup>4-6</sup> that inhabit the Amazon represents an immense wealth in terms of cultural, historical, and ethnic diversity, reflected in their worldviews, knowledge systems, ways of life, and relationships and interdependence with nature. Amazonian communities have coexisted with nature for millennia, and base their lives upon balanced interactions with resources and life support systems essential to survival<sup>7</sup> (see Chapters 10 and 13).

The understanding of interculturality by educational policies evolved in Latin America in the 1980s, when Indigenous peoples, NGOs, and in some cases States promoted intercultural bilingual education (IBE)<sup>8</sup>. According to Walsh, the 1990s were characterized by a new focus on ethno-cultural diversity in Latin America, including legal recognition of the need to promote positive relationships between different cultural groups and curb discrimination, racism, and exclusion; and promote a just, equitable, egalitarian, and plural society living and working together<sup>8</sup>.

In Colombia, Indigenous education, initially at the hands of the Catholic Church, underwent changes in response to the social and political struggles of different Indigenous organizations in the 1970's and 80's. Non-governmental organizations and academics were allies, expressing the need for education that defends culture and language.

In Ecuador, the most significant initiatives and proposals for Indigenous education were forged in the 1980s. In response to requests from highland and Amazonian Indigenous peoples, the govern-

ment of Ecuador created the Indigenous Directorate of Intercultural Bilingual Education (DinBIE) and the Provincial Directorates of Intercultural Bilingual Education in 1988. In 1992, the National Congress approved decentralization of the DinBIE. In 1993, the Bilingual Intercultural Education Model became official, and in 2000 the educational directorates were organized by nationality, within the framework of the different IBE zone networks<sup>9</sup>.

The 1988 Federal Constitution of Brazil was a milestone for the recognition of Brazilian sociocultural diversity, due to the successful mobilization and lobbying of Indigenous and Afro-descendent people and partners<sup>10</sup>. Recognition of socio-cultural diversity entered educational spaces well before the 1988 Federal Constitution; however, it was only in the 1990s that the construction and implementation of affirmative policies began to recognize and promote the social inclusion of minority and culturally differentiated groups who historically occupied marginal spaces<sup>10</sup>.

The Peruvian Federal Constitution of 1993 recognized intercultural bilingual education (IBE) as a fundamental right of Indigenous peoples, echoing the new constitutions of other Amazonian countries and international legislation, which increasingly advanced the recognition of IPLCs' rights. According to IBE Law No. 27818, the Ministry of Education is responsible for designing a National Intercultural Bilingual Education Plan for all levels and modalities of education, with the effective participation of Indigenous people<sup>11</sup>.

To explore the future of intercultural education, we follow two perspectives proposed by Walsh<sup>8</sup> which allow us to understand the various roles of interculturality. The first is the relational perspective, which explores contact and exchange between cultures, peoples, practices, and knowledge systems, whether on equal or unequal terms. The second is the functional perspective, which acknowledges diversity and cultural differences as intrinsic to the system. From this point of view, interculturality is part of system functioning; it does not include asymmetries or sociocultural inequalities as part

of its work. Experiences with intercultural education in the Amazon region evidence a diversity of approaches.

**Diversity in intercultural education and capacity building** Many Amazonian communities are not included in intercultural education policies. Addressing this demands a shift from requiring particular education for some groups to a contextualized education that recognizes the uniqueness and diversity of each human being and allows intrinsic knowledge to be constructed to meet the experiences of each educational space.

The concept of diversity in an educational context is occasionally understood through a reductionist lens associated with extraordinary situations in which students deviate from common standards or from the mainstream image of a “normal” student. This educational context often embodies a homogenizing educational model that develops strict curricula, identical methodological systems, and standardized systems of evaluation; all with the objective to train people using predetermined knowledge and behavioral patterns.

**Recognizing previous knowledge and education contexts** Recognizing students’ previous knowledge and the particularities of their educational contexts requires integral knowledge of the space and people with whom one interacts. This also requires respect for the knowledge that students acquire through their day-to-day lives. In this respect, Cole<sup>12</sup> states that “people develop cultural tools and cognitive skills associated with the domains of life in which these tools and skills are of central importance.” Similarly, Bruner<sup>13</sup> proposes a cultural psychology that situates the emergence and functioning of psychological processes within day-to-day social interactions, and symbolically in the events that people live out in their daily existence.

### **Intercultural education in practice: Case studies**

*Colombia: Pedagogical and intercultural training in SENA, Vaupés* Colombia shows important progress

in the recognition of cultural diversity, ancestral knowledge, and collective rights, as well as institutional policies that promote access to training in equal opportunities and attention to diversity. However, national administrations face difficulties to recognize and incorporate them into national policies and programs. In this sense, more efforts are needed to systematize, understand, recognize, and scale up successful examples of intercultural higher education.

The National Education Service (SENA, for its acronym in Spanish) is associated with Colombia’s Ministry of Labor and offers technical and technological capacity building. This institution invests in the social and technical development of workers, at the national level, and offers vocational training, including to Indigenous communities of the Colombian Amazon. Since 2013, SENA Vaupés has considered access to capital, including human resources but also the resources needed to support knowledge-based dialogues to integrate traditional and academic knowledge.

The inclusion of Indigenous people improves pedagogical practices. SENA has attempted to include Indigenous people in instructor trainings, defining learning objectives, designing learning guides, and adapting pedagogy to different contexts. They have also built relationships with Indigenous instructors to strengthen cultural identity in their training processes and implement local research based on ancestral knowledge.

*Colombia: Local research to strengthen autonomy and territorial governance* The Koreguaju people, with a population of about 3,700, belong to the Western Tukano linguistic family. A project developed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Tropenbos in 2018 aimed to strengthen local governments as a means to reduce deforestation in the Caquetá mosaic. The project also planned to create spaces for stakeholders in seven legally-recognized territories of the Koreguaju people and one territory of the Nasa people to exchange experiences in the participatory implementation of territorial mana-

gement plans<sup>g</sup>. This case study demonstrates how to deconstruct colonial practices through dialogue methodologies, articulate different ways of understanding the world, and explore environmental, productive, social, and cultural resources.

During this process two individuals from each of the eight territories participated, with the understanding that all participants would make important contributions and share lessons learned from their respective communities. The training consisted of combining a series of intra-community activities and inter-community meetings. The training culminated in the design of a pedagogical proposal for territorial management strengthening. Plans for local research encouraged diverse ways of constructing knowledge and allowed learning to be situated within context.

*Brazil: Indigenous intercultural education in the Rio Negro* There is perhaps no better place to explore intercultural experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples than the Rio Negro region, which is home to 23 ethnic groups, four linguistic families, and 18 distinct languages. In this area Indigenous people are born into an intercultural environment, especially when we consider the differences between father and mother that join to become one family.

The Indigenous Organization of the Içana Basin (OIBI, for its acronym in Portuguese), founded in 1992, serves the Baniwa and Koripako peoples. It has been an important tool for the Baniwa to realize their rights, leading the way on initiatives for traditional medicine, education, and more. Key achievements include the unification of spelling in the Baniwa language, the training of teachers, and the elaboration of the Baniwa and Koripako Indigenous School (BIEK Pamáali). In addition, it invested in the production and commercialization of basketry from Arumã and the culinary seasoning Baniwa jiquitaia pepper.

BIEK Pamáali is recognized by the São Gabriel da Cachoeira municipal educational system (Brazil). The Baniwa people began their fight for a school in 1984, and reaffirmed this demand in 1987 as part of the Rio Negro Indigenous movement. Between 1992 and 1997, several meetings were held to reach consensus on educational practices and curricula. In 1998, the school was proposed in partnership with the Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA for its acronym in Portuguese).

Since 2000, BIEK Pamáali developed its own learning processes based on the teach-by-research methodology. This methodology facilitates teaching and production of intercultural knowledge, whether it's cultural, technical, or scientific. The school is multilingual, offering lessons in three Indigenous and two national languages. Baniwa is one of the official Indigenous languages of the municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira and, along with Koripako, is widely spoken throughout this region.

*Colombia: The Balcanes Farm in the Universidad de la Amazonia* This case study examines the role of intercultural mediation at the university level and seeks to close two gaps in post-conflict Colombia, namely the disregard of gender and Indigenous peoples. These perspectives are crucial for the consolidation and continuation of the Peace Accords, a conclusion supported by academic research and field work on the role of intercultural knowledge in mediation<sup>14</sup>. In this context, the Balcanes case proposes the possibility of an alliance between a university (Universidad de la Amazonía) and an Indigenous community organization (Agrosolidaria) to lead a knowledge dialogue about the *chagra* (agricultural plot). This is an example where the university became an Intercultural Mediator of Knowledge (MIC for its name in Spanish) with Indigenous women farmers. The knowledge dialogue highlighted and strengthened the role of Indigenous women in securing food security and sov-

---

<sup>g</sup> The objective of these plans is to strengthen the governance within legally-recognized Indigenous territories through the reflection on territory, the available resources, and the

accordance of a zonification agreement for different uses and prioritization of actions for sustainable development.

ereignty. Women in the Amazon are increasingly assuming roles as household heads and leaders of agricultural production. This case study invites us to reclaim the role of universities and Indigenous or community organizations to recognize the

Indigenous *chagra* and to mediate in a productive knowledge dialogue.

*Brazil: Climate change strengthens the Indigenous peoples' struggle* This case study presents how Indigen-

Epistemic Violence: cognitive universals, formal activities, homogenizing models to understand development and learning.



Recognitions of practices and knowledge developed by different communities of the Amazon.



Complementary training with pedagogic use of participatory intercultural tools (bird watching in collective territory).



Dialogic Learning, connected with territory, with symbolic languages and with different productive and technological needs.



**Figure 31.1** Examples of mainstream education's epistemic violence (a), which can be overcome through Intercultural Education, including recognition of practices and knowledges (b), post-secondary education with intercultural tools (c), and dialogic learning connected to the territory (d).

ous leaders in the Brazilian Amazon use climate change to strengthen their fight for territorial rights. By strengthening the capacities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples are constructing their own narratives, based on their knowledge and life experiences, for incorporation into national climate policies. As an example, the National Plan of Adaptation in Brazil acknowledged Indigenous and local knowledge as an important tool for adaptation. Also, after multiple workshops with Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), the Plan included the results of their local studies about climate impacts on their lives. Indigenous peoples possess multiple different types of knowledge related to climate due to their dependency on natural resources, particularly on the seasonality of flora and fauna. Their deep understanding of variability allows them to easily distinguish normal delays from the impacts of climate change<sup>15</sup>.

**Emerging reflections and identified needs** Amazonian experiences with intercultural education are often implemented in local contexts, representing regional and sociocultural diversity in the Amazon basin. There are many more examples of successful experiences that deserve to be mapped and inform future plans for intercultural education. From the small set of initiatives described here, it is possible to observe that intercultural education in the Amazon is implemented in a variety of forms and spaces, e.g., in community schools that offer elementary and secondary-technical education, in institutions that offer post-secondary technical education, and in universities (Figure 31.1). These offer alternatives to the increasing integration of Indigenous populations and other Amazonian communities into standardized national programs.

Indigenous presence in universities offers possibilities for self-reflection on tertiary pedagogical practices and its role in society. These examples illustrate how IPLCs construct their own curricula, emphasizing language and autonomy. The diversity of cases allows us to conclude that when curricula and trainings are in dialogue with day-to-day

experiences, institutions and communities find new ways to relate to each other, constructing interculturality. Further examination of intercultural education in the Amazon basin in the scientific literature is needed, to understand both the development of programs and in the monitoring of such actions.

**Conclusions** Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) is rarely recognized in formal education processes and capacity building in the Amazon. Such knowledge is not only systematically ignored, but in many cases is intentionally and forcefully excluded. The case studies presented here provide examples of the diversity of contexts in which intercultural education can be constructed and contribute to a greater reflection about the benefits of incorporating ILK in locally-appropriate education. Recognition of the knowledge held by Amazonian peoples is a potent tool to maintain the extraordinarily rich socio-biodiversity in the region.

## References

1. Freire, P. *Pedagogía de la esperanza: un reencuentro con la pedagogía del oprimido*. (Siglo XXI Editores S. A., 2002).
2. Sepúlveda, G. Interculturalidad y construcción del conocimiento. *Educ. e Intercult. en los Andes y la Amaz.* 93–104 (1996).
3. Van der Hammen, M., Frieri, S., Zamora, N. C. & Navarrete, M. P. *Herramientas para la formación en contextos interculturales*. (Tropenbos Internacional Colombia, 2012).
4. Llorente, J. C. & Sacona, U. Investigación aplicada a la educación intercultural bilingüe: Algunas reflexiones epistemológicas. (2012).
5. Coordination of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin - COICA. *Agenda Indígena Amazónica*. <https://coica.org.ec/agenda-indigena-amazonica/> (2017).
6. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights - IACHR. *Situation of Human Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Pan-Amazon region*. (Organization of American States, 2019).
7. Rodríguez, C. & van der Hammen, M. Biodiversidad y manejo sustentable del bosque tropical por los indígenas Yukuna y Matapí de la Amazonia colombiana. in *El Vuelo de la Serpiente. Desarrollo sostenible en la América prehispanica* 86–107 (Siglo del hombre editores, 2000).
8. Walsh, C. Interculturalidad crítica y educación intercultural. in *Ampliación de la ponencia presentada en el Seminario "Interculturalidad y Educación Intercultural", organizado por el Instituto Internacional de Integración del Convenio Andrés Bello, La Paz* 9–11 (2009).
9. Vélez, C. Trayectoria de la educación intercultural en Ecuador. *Rev. Educ. y Pedagog.* 103–112 (2008).
10. Fialho, V. & Nascimento, R. *Antropologia, Educação e*

- Estado Pluricultural: : notas sobre o sistema educacional brasileiro frente à pluralidade cultural. *O Público e o Priv.* 16, 123–142 (2010).
11. del Pueblo, P. D. Aportes para una Política Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe a favor de los pueblos indígenas del Perú. <http://repositorio.minedu.gob.pe/bitstream/handle/20.500.12799/854/489>. Aportes para una Política Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe a favor de los pueblos indígenas del Perú.pdf?sequence=1&is-Allowed=y. (2011).
  12. Cole, M. *Psicología cultural: una disciplina del pasado y del futuro*. (Ediciones Morata, 1996).
  13. Bruner, J. *La educación, Puerta de la cultura. Colección Aprendizaje* (Visor Dis., SA Madrid, 1997).
  14. Herrera, B. Mediación Universitaria para la Solidaridad en Comunidades Morales. Por el derecho de la naturaleza en territorios de paz. in *Hechos y emprendimientos cooperativos de transformación* (eds. Álvarez, J., Zabala, H., Salgado, O., Sierra, D. & Salazar, F.) (Actas del XI Encuentro de Investigadores Latinoamericanos en Cooperativismo, 2020).
  15. Turner, N. J. & Clifton, H. “It’s so different today”: Climate change and indigenous lifeways in British Columbia, Canada. *Glob. Environ. Chang.* 19, 180–190 (2009).