



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Education as Cultural and Ecological Revitalization Among Amazonian Nationalities

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PLURINATIONALITY AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

Plurinationality represents an inclusive characteristic of the state that acknowledges various peoples and their organizational structures as possessors of equal sovereign rights. As a principle, plurinationality aims to guarantee the political representation of the different nationalities and ethnicities of peoples living in territories delineated by state borders.

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The popularization of the political discourse on plurinationality has occurred principally through constitutional changes in the Andean States, as a result of Indigenous movements' resistance to the hegemony of white populations and the marginalization of Indigenous nationalities, Afro-descendants and other mestizo and minority populations. This discourse has spread to other countries, mainly as a political objective but only rarely adopted, and is situated within the struggles for decolonization, seeking to disrupt the exclusive control of a limited group over a diverse space in its geographical, material, cultural and symbolic dimensions.

In order to materialize, plurinationality must implement an expansion of governance both over territories and the resources that constitute the material basis of livelihoods for many societal groups (Radhuber and Radcliffe 2023), and over knowledge and education, to guarantee the pluralism of historical narratives and the ontological and epistemological foundations of different cultures (Blaser 2014; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). Often, decolonization has been hindered by violent actions of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) that devalue language and knowledge systems, leading to epistemicide, that is, to annihilation, silencing and the erasure of knowledges.

Efforts towards plural subjectivity are, therefore, carried out through positive actions of epistemic justice, healing from discriminatory and cultural marginalization processes. A renewed ethic of knowledge has been proposed by collectives representing plural identities, which have established programs of recovery, restitution and revitalization of languages, cultures and worldviews. Public education is considered among the most appropriate instruments of cultural change, leading to a democratization and pluralism of knowledges, in which native communities can be recognized as producers and transmitters of knowledge that does not necessarily follow the European canon. For this reason, this book analyzes policies and educational practices proposed in Ecuador that are considered to be appropriate for the recovery of epistemic justice at the country level.

Access to schooling and higher education is crucial to empowering marginalized groups and improving their living conditions. In Ecuador, the Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) program was established to empower diverse cultural identities forming the plurinational state. Indigenous organizations, within the framework of the 500th anniversary of the Ibero-American conquest, fought for the constitutional recognition of the plurinational character of the country—a legal restructuring

allowing for the exercise of self-determination and the legal administration of crucial matters such as education in the communities (Rodríguez 2018). The goal of IBE, then, was to offer accessible schooling to all communities, integrating the various local languages, knowledge and pedagogical practices into an education based on the philosophy of *sumak kawsay*, ecologically balanced and culturally sensitive, and aiming to represent and revitalize cultures that have been under processes of invisibility and erasure for a long time.

However, especially in the last decade, implementation of the program has faced numerous challenges. According to critical arguments expressed by Indigenous organizations, as we will see in the next chapter, educational practices have been weakened by various restrictions repurposing full adherence to homogenized Eurocentric standards, neglecting specific cultural realities or ancestral knowledge. This educational approach places Indigenous nations and other peoples at a disadvantage compared to the majoritarian white-mestizo culture. Here, the terms majority and minority should be interpreted in terms of power rather than demographics. Minoritization indicates a process of racial subordination and racial oppression that also involves the cultural expressions and knowledge of subjugated groups.

This book addresses in particular the implementation of IBE in the Amazonian region. It follows the public and academic debates that have taken place in the country (Almeida and Figueroa 2016) and also internationally (Mato 2008, 2012). In particular, its focus is on the province of Pastaza, observing the application of IBE in educational units in the Kichwa, Shuar and Sapara areas, with special attention to high-school and university education—those that prepare young people for adult life.

The book is the product of a research collaboration involving researchers from the University of Helsinki, from the Universidad Estatal Amazónica (UEA), activists from the Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (CONFENIAE) and instructors operating in schools in the study area. The project's intention was not so much to study the issue of bilingual or plurilingual presence in education, but rather the inclusion of themes and pedagogies that support the cultural and ecological identity of young Amazonians.

For the project's researchers and the contributors to this book, the inclusion of Indigenous pedagogies and knowledge is part of quality education in the Ecuadorian Amazonia. The inclusion of ecological aspects is crucial because Amazonian Indigenous groups have strong

connections to the land and nature, currently threatened by illegal logging, oil extraction and climate change. The ties to the land define particular relationships among human, non-human, and more-than-human beings, in a cosmology sustained through ancestral knowledge and a non-extractive but respectful relationship with the different forms of nature. Pluriversalizing education by advocating for this diversity of ecocultural identities (Castro-Sotomayor and Minoia 2024) means protecting both the natural environment of the Amazon and the Indigenous peoples from poverty and epistemic erasure.

Furthermore, it should be considered that the implementation of IBE has been challenged not only by changes in the political objectives of the Ecuadorian government, but also by the socioeconomic poverty of the region, and the reduced investment in the education sector. IBE institutes are mostly located in marginalized areas and despite official claims highlighting their crucial role in the realization of the plurinational state (Cruz Rodríguez 2013; Cabrero 2019), they lack public funding. The overall disinvestment in IBE is reflected in the shortage of teachers with knowledge of Indigenous languages and intercultural pedagogy, and in the poor quality of educational materials. The available manuals are far from being capable of nurturing the cultures, cosmologies and ways of life of Indigenous students and propose standardized contents, presenting concepts and information disconnected from ways of life and ancestral practices based on the land and ecological cycles, relations with non-human entities, and spiritual connections with the forest.

Therefore, this book first addresses the educational policy debate between governments and Indigenous organizations, and then reports on experiences based in various educational units of the Amazonian province of Pastaza and at the UEA. Fieldwork led us to observe other issues that we initially did not plan to address, such as the difficulties for Indigenous students to access higher education, and various socio-psychological implications. Challenges in adaptation experienced by students from rural and Indigenous communities may in fact cause feelings of estrangement, low self-esteem and subalternity, and exclusion, ultimately leading to school drop-outs. Franz Fanon (2001) addressed this issue in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The research has also demonstrated that interculturality cannot solve the problems of epistemic injustice only at an intellectual and political level, but must also integrate aspects of caring that require socio-psychological support. Echoing the triple meanings of coloniality—the coloniality of knowledge (De Sousa Santos

2010), the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) and the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2007)—we believe that this latter has to be crucially addressed by intercultural education programs. However, forms of support for Indigenous and minoritized student wellbeing, though necessary, are not provided by intercultural educational programs; rather, they are left to self-organized spaces of student circles, sometimes with volunteer support by individual teachers through extracurricular activities (Arias-Gutiérrez and Minoia 2023). In the book, we will present experiences of student care circles offered at the UEA.

THEORIES AND GUIDING CONCEPTS

The different chapters of the book reflect the diverse experiences and positionalities of the authors; however, there are certain principles and terms that we share as common foundations. In particular, the shared orientation is towards a decolonial education which liberates from the centrality of European knowledge and its project of modernity/rationality (Quijano 2007) that has established a social classification based on ethnicity and disempowered Indigenous forms of knowledge, described as primitive (Quijano 2011). We reflect on our subjectivity, also in terms of ethnicity and privilege (although whites normally do not reflect on their own position), and the relation between scientific knowledge and power. We support education as a space for nurturing an ecology of knowledge without ranking and in a relation of incommensurability. We believe that education should be instrumental in the recognition of identities and land-based localization of Indigenous peoples, providing decolonial alternatives for sustainable transformative futures and socioecological justice (Nakata et al. 2012; Kerr and Andreotti 2018). Hence, intercultural education can contribute to the construction of a plurinational citizenship allowing for the exercise of collective rights by Indigenous peoples (Cabrero 2013; González Díez et al. 2022).

In line with these principles, the research intention is to identify the elements influencing the praxis of intercultural reconstruction in the communities of the Amazonian region. We do this by observing, listening, conversing and participating, with a qualitative research approach and, for some of the authors, an ongoing commitment beyond this research project.

Even from a theoretical point of view, we owe much to the pedagogical reflections of Catherine Walsh regarding, for example, the destructive

consequences of standardized national programs for community identities and territorial self-determination (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), the relationship between racism, sexism and nature, or the need to integrate depatriarchalization into the decolonial project (Walsh 2007).

In addition, from Walsh (2008, 2012) we have borrowed the distinction between the different understandings of interculturality that have led to misunderstandings, conflicts and frustrations, especially on the part of the representatives of minority—or, better said, minoritized—populations. The distinction particularly refers to the fundamental difference between functional interculturality and critical interculturality. The neoliberal model that recognizes cultural diversity without questioning the foundations of global capitalist exploitation (Walsh 2012) frames the former and is present in the discursive rhetoric about inclusive multicultural education (Walsh 2008; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Critical interculturality, in contrast, acknowledges the persistent culture of colonial and racial exploitation and advocates for a social reconstruction with equal rights, without annulment or subordination from any side (Walsh 2014). Our study adopts the critical interculturality goal, in line with the struggles led by Indigenous movements for a radical social transformation. The objective is not to replace one cultural hegemony with another, but to create a new political and social order based on conviviality. Within this principle of critical interculturality, some chapters interpret the term of intercultural education in a more radical manner, close to Indigenous pedagogy and as a basis for political action, while others maintain the profile presented in ministerial programs of the *Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (MOSEIB)* and its curricular redesign for the Amazonian region, called *Apliquemos el Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe en la Amazonía (AMEIBA)*.

THE AMAZONIAN CONTEXT

Latin America is characterized by significant socioeconomic inequality inherited from the Iberian conquest and colonization. The republics formed since the nineteenth century adopted European models to rule uniformly diverse societies throughout various spheres of economic, political, social and symbolic power. Education followed, and still maintains to this day the same Eurocentric pattern of dominant thought—the Western one—from primary education until university instruction.

Although Amazonian cultures have shown a high degree of efficient adaptation to the forest environment since about 3000 BCE (Valdez 2003), the knowledge developed in the Amazonian environment and its diverse cultural existence have not received sufficient attention and sensitivity from government powers. The Amazonian territories where Indigenous nationalities live have been exploited, particularly through oil deposits, for the development of the rest of the country, assimilating the various peoples into a common order. This is a tragic example of a nation aware of its *mestizaje*, but lacking a real understanding of its Indigenous peoples (Goldman 1982).

The large number of mestizo populations living in the Amazonian region has its origins in the mid-twentieth century, when government policies promoted the migration of settlers from densely populated mountainous and coastal areas to the Amazon, dispossessing Indigenous peoples of much of their traditional lands (Minoia et al. 2024). Consequently, Indigenous groups live fragmented in remote rural areas, while rapidly growing towns contribute to the standardization of languages and cultures despite ethnic segregation (Bilsborrow et al. 2004).

Development and modernization strategies, and management and control plans focused on ethnic homogenization have proved inadequate for tropical ecosystems and promoted white supremacy affecting Indigenous peoples, even in their symbolic manifestations (Whitten 1978, p. 10). This has led to the emergence of self-determination claims (Whitten 2003), involving the pursuit of pertinent intercultural education responding to the needs of territories and their Indigenous nationalities.

From a socioeconomic perspective, Ecuadorian Amazonian provinces are among the poorest with unmet basic needs (Castillo and Andrade 2016, p. 126). Inequalities particularly affect provinces with a larger Indigenous population and rural areas (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos INEC 2022). Poverty is continually exacerbated by environmental disasters of anthropogenic origin. For instance, during our study period, numerous incidents caused by river floods resulted in extensive environmental, infrastructure, residential and local economic damage. In addition, an oil spill caused tremendous and widespread soil and water contamination (Minoia 2020). Furthermore, communities remain on constant alert due to numerous public interventions to divert water from their sacred rivers to meet the water and electricity needs of other urban and industrial areas. Finally, the geography of the region, despite comprising community territories, is disputed by mining and

oil industries that have obtained concessions from state governments. Movements defending the territories, resisting expropriation (frequently executed with military involvement) and countering forced migration by all possible means, are common.

Public services in the Amazonian region, including higher education, are rather poor and with minimal public investment. The educational gap affecting these communities is part of a broader condition of social marginalization and poverty due to the limited distribution of infrastructure and basic services in Indigenous territories, the proletarianization of many Indigenous families and the patriarchal culture that persists in the society (Perreault 2003; Méndez Torres 2009). Education in the region has been overseen by religious missions not only during the colonial period, but also since independence. State involvement began only in the second half of the twentieth century (Ruiz 2000). While in Quito the first public university was founded in 1786, based on universities previously run by religious convents since the colonial era in the sixteenth century (Primicias.ec 2022), in the Ecuadorian Amazonian region, the establishment of the first public university, the Universidad Estatal Amazónica (UEA), occurred only on October 18, 2002 (UEA 2022).

Even scientific research has only marginally affected the region. Most research in the Ecuadorian Amazonia has been conducted by outsiders, not involving local researchers, and has mainly focused on biology, flora and fauna inventories, and conservation, with only a minor interest in anthropological and political ecology studies. Education studies and pedagogical projects, in particular, have lagged behind and have employed methods and content alien to the Amazon reality, adhering to models more adapted for cities and that have encouraged rural and Indigenous marginalization and rural–urban migration (Ruiz 2000; Veintie et al. 2022).

It is also relevant to consider the role of international cooperation in education. In the field of IBE, the project Educación Intercultural Bilingüe para la Amazonía (EIBAMAZ) funded by UNICEF and Finland until 2012, produced textbooks for primary grades (UNICEF 2012) and supported pedagogical research at the University of Cuenca on Amazonian ancestral wisdom and on tools for IBE curricular development in Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Siona, Secoya, Kofan, Waodani and Sapara Indigenous areas (UNICEF 2013). Other studies have addressed IBE implementation issues mainly at the national level, with marginal consideration for the Amazonian context (Krainer and Guerra Bustillos

2012), or presented reflections on the potential of intercultural environmental education that integrates the ancestral knowledge of Amazonian Indigenous peoples within the theoretical framework of Latin American liberation theology (Prieto Cruz 2021). Other works that have particularly inspired this book include those exploring the relationship between extractivism and education, such as Miriam Lang's (2017) study revealing how mining extractivism has uprooted native populations, relocating them to newly urbanized mining and oil areas where the educational offer, comprising Millennium Schools, does not follow the IBE model and, on the contrary, is completely estranged from the localities.

If IBE has received pedagogical attention in the Amazonian school context, in higher education it has been largely lacking, with the exception of a recent study on the experience of interculturality at the UEA (Arias-Gutiérrez and Minoia 2023), and a previous article by Wilson and Bayón (2017) which views the establishment of the Ikiam University based in Tena (Napó province) as an instrument of the neoliberal economy of knowledge, commodifying the genetic wealth and the Indigenous knowledge of the Amazon, thus legitimizing the expansion of oil and mining frontiers.

In fact, universities located in the Amazonian region still have a low Indigenous student presence. Responding to the demand for student enrollment from the communities, promoting equity, fostering culturally pertinent education, ensuring equal opportunities, and improving the quality and scope of public education, are formidable challenges for the educational system and for universities tasked with generating science and deepening our understanding of societies to preserve their values, assets, resources and rights. Universities uphold the right to higher education as a path of civic, responsible growth, in competent community engagement, where the relationality with the territory still needs to be expanded, and social and cultural fabric strengthened, to overcome the marginalization of certain knowledge and honor the pluriversity in which the country is immersed. The path is hard, since a vision of an alternative decolonizing education that contributes to the development of an intercultural and plurinational state, as promised in the Ecuadorian constitution, is still lacking.

TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THIS BOOK

In addition to theoretical and political discussions framing the cultural negotiation between the central government and Indigenous organizations, the book presents concrete cases regarding the spatiality of access to education, the pedagogical challenges faced by schools and teaching staff, and various other conditions experienced by students from the Amazonian communities when accessing higher education. The first chapters contextualize the educational situation from a historical-political and socioeconomic perspective, while those following provide local perspectives and solidarity actions through extracurricular activities.

Chapter 2, “Public education policies and the struggle of the Indigenous movement for a decolonial interculturality”, discusses intercultural education, the political and historical situation of its creation and operation in the late twentieth century, current challenges, and the fragile relationships between a discourse that recognizes a pluricultural, intercultural, multilingual country in the legal system, and its weak application. Decoloniality, interculturality and plurinationality can be conceived in different ways by various actors, but in practice, bureaucratic tendencies prevail, generating conflicts. The chapter conceptually discusses the state of the art on interculturality and decoloniality, and contextualizes IBE implementation, in its peak and decline, and the struggles of Indigenous organizations to maintain it as a vital project.

The third chapter, “Characteristics of the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the school system”, investigates the problems faced by students who self-identify as belonging to Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities, regarding enrollment and academic performance for grade promotion, amidst the regional and national socioeconomic context. It diagnoses the socioeconomic changes of Amazonian Indigenous nationalities, and their integration into the capitalist market economy driven by oil exploitation and other productive sectors. In addition, it analyzes the inclusion of Indigenous youth in the school system, considering the net attendance rate in early childhood, primary and secondary education, school drop-out and failure rates, based on tests by the Instituto Nacional de Educación Evaluativa in a prospective analysis to show trends in access to tertiary-level education.

“From discourse to structure: interculturality in Amazonian universities” presents some institutional perspectives on intercultural education within public universities operating near Indigenous territories in the

Amazon region. It briefly presents the Regional Amazonian University Ikiam, the revived Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University, and focuses more specifically on the experience of the Universidad Estatal Amazónica (UEA), based on the analysis of the territory in which it is located. Enrollment data are observed in relation to public goals regarding regional student access to higher public education.

Chapter 5, “Intercultural education and agency of Indigenous communities: a view from the Sapara territory”, presents an ethnographic analysis of the education of this Indigenous nationality, which is the smallest recognized in Ecuador. It examines the problems and opportunities for educational access faced by populations living in remote areas and their strategies to build better quality education, supplementing the lack of public investment within their territory through other sources. Among other deficiencies, the fact that there is no possibility of including official instruction in the Sapara language poses a serious threat to the survival of this language and culture.

The field research presented in Chapter 6, “Indigenous young people’s access to schools in the province of Pastaza”, studies the situation in several schools in Kichwa and Shuar areas. First, it examines how high-school students travel to schools in terms of means of transport, distances and travel times, considering gender differences (and related domestic tasks), and differences between Indigenous and mestizo students. In addition, it explores how students experience their school journeys in different environments and the challenges of the forest territory, including route changes due to weather and flooding, and group travel experiences.

Chapter 7, “Educational experiential calendars: creating links between Indigenous communities and high school”, proposes the adoption of calendars based on the cosmovisions and experiences of Indigenous communities in the IBE units, which respect the cycles of the seasons, farming, harvest and traditional festivals. The elaboration of calendars should be carried out by each educational unit involving parents, wise elders and other community members. In practice, however, there are many difficulties in achieving the ambitious goal of preparing school calendars, especially from the perspective of teachers overloaded with other teaching obligations, and often unfamiliar with the territories in which they work.

Chapter 8, “Interculturality in the classroom: accompanying students from minority cultures in Pastaza”, reports experiences from the university classroom environment of UEA. The introduction of methodologically active and critical tools, such as supporting the *Retomando Raíces* Collective, and forms of community therapy composed of “binding wheels” and “caring for the educator”, known as the pedagogy of being, has been necessary for establishing environments conducive to reflective learning. In the same way, teachers recognize the need to respond to their students’ personal and community needs in the midst of interactions in a territory into which they move from different regions and come together supporting each other beyond the scope of learning goals in specific subjects.

Finally, “Participatory design interventions: supporting university student care networks in times of Covid” aims to evaluate and monitor the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the access to education and wellbeing of Amazonian students, and support university responses to the emergency. In particular, the chapter presents a participatory design project that involved UEA students and students from Quito, who established contact through a mobile application, allowing them to get to know each other and exchange life and study experiences during the isolation period.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Certainly, many questions remain open and unresolved. The pandemic has blocked many initiatives that were still planned for this research. The possibility offered by the Internet has allowed the continuation of communications, albeit limited to privileged individuals equipped with computers, electricity and a functioning network. However, we hope to have opened a window onto an educational reality for which there is still much work to be done, in support of the knowledge, creativity and aspirations expressed by the territory, families, wise individuals, Indigenous organizations and representatives of Amazonian peoples, in dialogue with the world of school and higher education.

The presence of an IBE program and public universities like the UEA in the Amazonian territory is crucial for an area of extraordinary biodiversity and cultures that can shape research and learning through various ways of knowing, connecting and preserving. Therefore, it will

be necessary to deepen land-based education, increase interconnectedness and coexistence with local communities, use local languages and integrate ancestral knowledge into the science curricula at all levels. The current model of education repeated year after year, following centralized curriculum development formulated on capitalist and neoliberal models, is not sustainable. The need for a radical change is not only local, but also global. We are in a situation of accelerated mass extinction caused by the persistent model of intensive environmental exploitation that is still taught in the classroom as a strategy for wealth production. Indigenous students are experiencing in person the marginalization of their knowledge and life experiences, judged as primitive and not functional to the modernization of the country. Our text has shown that the single curricular model produces deep anxieties in student communities. These anxieties cannot be considered as individual problems but as structurally related to the colonial pedagogical and cultural models proposed in academia.

Educational institutions must, on the contrary, maintain a focus on cultural restitution objectives. Therefore, they must recognize Indigenous peoples as guardians of the forest, and learn from their respectful and convivial practices among human and non-human beings, recognizing the role of offerings and spiritual relationships with Mother Earth, which Western culture, having only functional relationships with the so-called natural capital, does not appreciate. Therefore, academia must become pluriversal, making space for ancestral knowledge, practices and cosmologies in both academic subjects and research. Educational institutions must recognize and learn from the bearers of this knowledge who, though they may not have academic degrees, have knowledge and practices transmitted through generations. They must offer these epistemic possibilities to younger generations from any identity background, so they can recognize the processes of critical changes, and address them. Epistemic justice is necessary if we want to build a new civilization and save our planet.

Finally, we want to thank all the people we have met on our journey, both in the villages and in the schools we have visited, for the great teachings they have given us. We also want to thank community leaders who facilitated our entry into their territories. We also want to express our gratitude to all the enthusiasts of decolonial intercultural education, both in Ecuador and in other countries, with whom we have been able to deepen our reflections and open new work perspectives. Finally, we thank Ferran Cabrero and Javier González Díez for their comments and

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