



Cultural diversity: a human right at risk from standardized evaluation

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Evaluation Strategies in Indigenous Communities

Since ancient times, societies have learned to arrange their ideas based on what they want for the continuity of personal, family and community life. What is important for them makes sense for both the present and the future. This is how the training and preparation of future generations is constructed. This constant construction is reflected in the attitudes and production that contribute to the continuity of life based on the present context.

In indigenous communities, knowledge is put into practice in the different fundamental services carried out from a very early age, where, with actions and participation the following are applied: respect, humility, honour, sincerity, mutual support, listening to one's representatives. The utility of lessons and learning is demonstrated as different situations are confronted, such as how community affairs are dealt with and the negotiations and mediations needed to maintain har-

mony in the community. Through these acts, traditional culture is reproduced. Its needs and perspectives are also re-invented through the power of collectivity.

These attitudes and the knowledge that the members of these communities display are the result of community practices that are acquired in different family and community spaces and activities. Based on these, the people construct and reconstruct forms of organizing, acting and participating. That is to say, the way in which we educate ourselves for life based on the needs of our surroundings that are different for each community, just as the perspectives of the future are. This means that our own reality is learned and strengthened and, consequently, cultural and linguistic diversity is constructed. In this manner the community values itself and in turn supports subjects as they carry out their work. It values students not to say goodbye to them or exile them from their community, but rather to continue their training through participation in the communal collective.

Community evaluation in the presence of schools

With the establishment of schools in indigenous communities, collective evaluation is lost, because the rules and interests of schools are different. At school, it is teachers that evaluate according to what is taught during a specific period. What is measured is how much of what has been taught is repeated, not how much of what was taught was applied in daily life. In this manner, step by step, cultural and linguistic diversity is being eliminated. Bit by bit, thought is being oriented towards one universal model of seeing nature, society, needs - not only those of the future, but also those of the present and above all, of the immediate context. What is being constructed is a single model of seeing, thinking and relating to the social and natural world. This is emphasized so that the local world resembles or is the most like the universal, homogenizing the perspective of needs and ways to address them and what is constructed is only one way to see and live in and not with the world.

It's not that we are against schools, but what is certain is that currently, in all of Mexico, school is the one institution that children attend, both by obligation and by right. It is the only one in charge of "educating" them, without there being much reflection on the national education policy with which they are educated. It is very likely that this kind of reflection does not come from parents, because, for the most part, their own experience has led them to believe that schools should be in charge of their children's education. There is neither the time nor the space to question who determines what should be taught in school, nor is much thought given to the communities' cultural deterioration.

In the case of Mexico, the state defines the curriculum for basic education, which includes preschool, primary and secondary education. It also designs and produces the textbooks which reflect the subjects of study and content that the country's children and youth will receive, all in the name of Mexican nationalism. The perspectives of indigenous communities are sorely lacking, not because they don't want to contribute, but because the conditions are not created to include them, as it is not in the state's interest, nor is it a constitutional right.

Cultural diversity as a human right

Mexico is a multicultural and multilingual country as established in Article 2 of the Mexican Political Constitution, which states:

"The Nation has a pluri-cultural composition that is based originally in its Indigenous peoples who are those who descend from the populations that lived in the country's present territory at the beginning of colonization, and who preserve their own social, economic, cultural or political institutions, or part of them."

At the federal, state and municipal government levels this mandate is being ignored. Although there are some government institutions that are in charge of the education of indigenous peoples - the General Department of Indigenous Education (DGEI), the

National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), to name the two most important - in practice it does not happen like the mandate states. For the indigenous population there are no concrete education programs that strengthen pluri-culturality in an in-depth manner, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes in Article 26, section c) "Instill in children respect for their parents, for their own cultural identity and its language and values, for the national values of the country where they live, for their country of origin and for civilizations different then their own."

Both indigenous and non-indigenous Mexican children are taught with the same curriculum and subjects. This violates the right to cultural and linguistic diversity, because at school the learning that is prioritized is that which is set by official education programs and little or no time or space is left to strengthen students' own cultures.

In these programs neither the context nor the interests of daily life are emphasized. Another important fact is that although at the preschool and primary levels there are two types of schools, one indigenous and the other general, both types are found in indigenous territories. They are found amidst a clear process of hispanization because Spanish is the official language of instruction in the schools. Therefore, students are taught and evaluated in this language based on the subjects and content established in the official education programs. The goal is for these subjects and content to be located within certain parameters of learnings and attitudes, in order to be accredited by a mark that gives the right to pass to another grade and level. The student must always reflect that s/he is acquiring the manners of thinking, the ways and the language that the school transmits. At the centre of the teaching and evaluation is repetition and memorization, perhaps with the possibility of



reflection but without too much distance from what is taught. This is called evaluation. The justification is that what is learned in one grade continues into the following grades and education levels, although not necessarily for the students' real and present lives. This is referred to as quality education, without considering that what is learned should be useful in the present and future of a subject as a collective and individual being.

This model of schooling does not contribute to an education that considers the cultural differences among children. Indigenous children have to learn the content set by the official programs, which present new perspectives. For example, natural resources are viewed as raw material for work not as elements that make up part of human life, and the relationship of humans with nature is seen differently. With the proposal for standardized evaluation, in a very subtle manner the consciousness of the present self of future generations of indigenous people is destroyed. And with this, the right to be taught among diversity is negated.

In the face of this situation, it is urgent that the content reproduced in schools be diversified so that evaluation is also varied and not standardized. In addition, content and evaluation should be designed with the participation of indigenous communities in order to guarantee the inclusion of the specific needs for the present and future and the continuity of their language and culture as a human right, as is proposed in the ILO Convention 169 in Article 27 section 1.

“Education programs and services directed at interested peoples should be developed and applied together with them with the goal of responding to their particular needs, and should include their history, knowledge and techniques, their value systems and all of their other social, economic and cultural aspirations.”

As we can observe, education for all children, not only those from indigenous communities, should respond first to the immediate and long-term interests and priorities of life and consider the characteristics and

needs of its community and the broader context. We should also take into account that these are individual and group subjects, with specific characteristics that give rise to and give sense to cultural and linguistic diversity. This is why the reproduction and strengthening of the following practices should be guaranteed: the *tequio*, the *guesta*¹, respect for and relationship with nature, different ways of seeing, thinking and relating to the world and the use of native languages, among other cultural elements that school limits.

This does not mean that indigenous children should be discriminated against, marginalized or have their right to learn what is outside of their context negated, but rather what is needed is to create the conditions and opportunities so that they can strengthen their own culture. This should also be the case for non-indigenous children, who should know deeply about the cultural and linguistic diversity that in many cases they live within, so that they can live in equal intercultural relationships, which enable the creation of conditions for the development of their full human rights.

It is necessary to clarify that we cannot nor should we distance ourselves from the macro, from the teachings of the sciences, of technology, of the knowledge and wisdom of other cultures. But we also cannot abandon the contextual, that which is useful and gives meaning to indigenous identity, that which helps to build a community life.

Diversity and teacher training

If the rights of children and those of indigenous and non-indigenous communities are taken into account and given priority, then teachers training should also be diversified so that they can carry out their activities in the context of indigenous communities. This would also imply transforming the curriculum of teacher training schools, because teachers must be trained not only to reproduce the focus of the official education programs, but also to strengthen what indigenous

1. The *tequio* is a kind of collective work that people should do for their community. The *guesta* refers to products that are offered to visitors during festivities and which are shared.



Photo: "Return the rights of the indigenous peoples." Parents protest neoliberal education reforms in Oaxaca, Mexico.

children have learned from their own context. This is the first space in which what is learned in the classroom can be put into practice, because it is here that they will find the first needs and perspectives of the future, without forgetting the needs that could be confronted in other broader contexts, with other perspectives. In this sense, teacher training and study plans should be transformed, especially in intercultural contexts, in order to avoid standardized evaluation as this leads to a standardized education.

Standardization not only affects children and teachers. It also has a great effect on the life of communities,

especially among indigenous peoples. If the way of thinking of future generations is transformed at a very young age, there is no doubt that in the near future the language and culture of these peoples will disappear. This is because children spend the majority of the day at school and have less of the day left for learning about and reproducing their own culture. Schools don't train students for their current context nor in the present time, but rather for an uncertain future when a level of formal university training is reached, something which is very difficult for indigenous children and youth. As a result there is a double negation and violation of rights. For children, school serves to distance them from the context of their culture. For youth, their right to access a university level is limited, for lack of economic resources, among other reasons. This is why it is necessary and urgent to reorient teacher training.

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