

# National educational plan: Indigenous School Education



*Aracy Lopes da Silva (1949-2000)*  
Fotos do arquivo da família

## Explanation

One of the basic demands made by the popular indigenous movements that emerged from the start of the 1970s in Brazil was recognition of the right to quality school education, adapted to the unique sociocultural and linguistic characteristics of the many different indigenous peoples inhabiting the country.

This proposal signalled a clear rejection of the integrationist and assimilationist ethos that had oriented the imposition of schooling and writing among indigenous peoples from the very beginning of Portuguese colonization. At the same time, it also meant a clear valorisation of the school's potential as a space for critical reflection and discussion of the living conditions of indigenous peoples as they become included in Brazilian society. Along the same lines, the school was conceived as a means for indigenous groups to access essential information on the larger world of which they now inexorably formed part.

The idea that there is not necessarily any incompatibility between the introduction of schooling among indigenous peoples and the preservation of

their linguistic and cultural specificities became one of the most important tenets of the indigenous movement in the country, combined with the fight for recognition of their territorial rights and of their existence as Brazilian citizens of the present and the future. In making these demands, indigenous peoples were supported by key sectors of civil society, motivated by the desire for less violent relationships between ethnically differentiated sectors of the population, by the positive perception of Brazil as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country, and by the commitment to building democracy in the country.

In the field of education, this conception was anchored in innovative school projects, implemented in different regions of the country, formulated by specific indigenous groups in close association with non-governmental organisations, universities and pastoral agents. One of the most consistent outcomes of these projects was the emergence of a large contingent of indigenous teachers in the country, dedicated to building a properly indigenous form of schooling, united in local associations and regional organisations responsible for hosting periodic meetings and producing documents setting out proposals.

Though varying in their execution, these projects shared, in the past as now, the conviction that as well as possessing their own scientific, aesthetic and philosophical knowledge elaborated over centuries of observation, experimentation and deep reflection, indigenous peoples have their specific educational methods and processes, which existed long before the introduction of schooling among them.

Certain in the knowledge that the school is a supplementary institution incapable of replacing indigenous education, but necessary as a space of interlocution with the non-indigenous world, indigenous movements in Brazil and the sectors supporting them invested a huge effort in support of their rights in the field of education. Recognizing the legitimacy of these demands, the 1988 Federal Constitution guarantees indigenous populations the right to differentiated, specific, intercultural and bilingual school education. It also recognizes the distinct identities of indigenous peoples and their right to maintain them, and assigns the State the duty to safeguard and project the cultural manifestations of indigenous societies.

The regulation of these rights is primarily determined by two legislative instruments. Decree 26/91 assigns responsibility for coordinating indigenous

school education initiatives to the Ministry of Education (MEC) and responsibility for their implementation to the federal states and municipalities, after consultation with the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). Interministerial Directive 559/91 establishes the National Indigenous Education Committee, with representatives from indigenous peoples and non-indigenous civil society, a long-standing demand of the organizations involved with indigenous issues in Brazil.

Likewise, Article 78 of the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB) reaffirms the need to recognize the sociocultural and linguistic diversity of indigenous peoples in the country and guarantees them an intercultural and bilingual school education, respectful of the knowledge, languages and sciences of these peoples and their right to the preservation of their own identities and the recuperation of their historical memory, as well as guaranteeing indigenous peoples access to “the information and knowledge valued by national society.” The same law (Article 79) assigns responsibility to the Federal Government for technical and financial support to states and municipalities for the development of initiatives in the field of indigenous school education, emphasizing the need to consult the communities over the implementation of programs with the objectives of “strengthening sociocultural practices and maternal languages.” The notion of differentiated schools to cater for indigenous populations is also explicitly set out in Article 79 of the same law, which establishes a directive requiring the development of “specific curricula and programs that include cultural contents corresponding to the respective communities,” anticipating the systematic publication of “specific and differentiated didactic material.”

In practice numerous obstacles still need to be overcome in order for specific and differentiated indigenous rights to be fully respected. Recognition of these rights at legislative level and in Brazilian educational policy has been achieved through persistent indigenous mobilization and the support of their collaborators. The creation of the Indigenous Education Committee, an Indigenous Schools Support Coordination Group and a line of funding for targeted educational projects, the elaboration and publication by the MEC of teaching materials in indigenous languages, and the development of Curriculum References for Indigenous Schools are some of the positive results of this process, successes to be preserved, widened and improved. On the other hand, enormous difficulties still remain in relation to physical

infrastructures and the training of indigenous teachers. Many of the schools operating in indigenous areas reproduce the authoritarian and assimilationist approaches of the past, imposing outmoded pedagogical methodologies on the communities hosting these schools. This directly contradicts the constitutional and legal precepts assuring indigenous peoples an education that is bilingual (or multilingual, depending on the local context of each indigenous group), intercultural, differentiated and specific.

In the case of indigenous schooling, the recommendation is for educational policies to be administered and executed by the relevant authorities at state level, based on principles defined by the Ministry of Education in accordance with current legislation. Various reasons exist for this recommendation. On one hand, the concentration of these policies at federal level – the situation prior to 1991 – has already proven to be an unviable model given the huge sociocultural, linguistic and historical diversity of today's indigenous peoples. This is compounded by the lack of sufficient personnel with specific training and the sheer extent of the linguistic, anthropological and historical knowledge already accumulated on these peoples, albeit still partial, which impedes the training of specialists capable of working with the full range of existing situations. The ways in which indigenous communities are incorporated in regional and national social, economic and political life also varies widely, and thus how the indigenous groups define their projects for the future. These need to be matched by equally differentiated pedagogical projects and curricula.

At the same time, we need to take into account the critical considerations already set out in the National Education Plan for Brazilian Society concerning the potential for exclusion contained in the proposal for transferring primary level schooling for indigenous populations to municipal control. It should be remembered that, generally speaking, when it comes to the conditions for survival of these peoples and their specific rights, it is at municipal level that the most violent conflicts tend to break out, whether motivated by land issues and the economic and political interests associated with indigenous territories and their natural resources, or caused by prejudice and discrimination.

For these reasons, the transfer of primary level education of indigenous peoples to municipal level can more often than not have negative consequences. Nonetheless, given the specificities of the indigenous population

in the country, some exceptional situations exist that show the need for flexibility: ‘indigenous municipalities’ in Amazonia or in other regions of the country (mostly inhabited by indigenous peoples, who are represented politically and occupy posts in the executive and the legislature) and places where a successful partnership was consolidated between local councils and indigenous communities. Though the exception to the rule, these are situations in which municipalisation enhances the local indigenous population’s democratic access to a differentiated and high-quality school education, with the communities participating actively in their construction and execution.

The opening of the National Education System to the specific requirements of indigenous peoples, to the multiplicity of situations and the sociocultural diversity that characterize them, thus becomes as a means to guarantee hard-won indigenous educational rights.

In sum, it is worth repeating here what was written in the National Plan for the Education of Brazilian Society: “...indigenous peoples must be assured the right, as citizens of the country, to quality school education, with a view to their social and political inclusion in national life and, simultaneously, respect for the culture and social organization of each indigenous nation. It is the State’s duty to guarantee all the necessary conditions – human, linguistic, financial, physical and technico-pedagogical – for this education to be provided within this framework, ensuring that government actions are coordinated with the work developed by agents of the movements and entities that unite the struggles of these peoples.”

## **Directives**

- The State shall be responsible for ensuring that the country’s indigenous communities and peoples have access to differentiated, intercultural, bilingual (or multilingual) and specific school education, adapted to the sociocultural and linguistic characteristics of each population, respectful of indigenous knowledge, conceptions and practices in all their diversity and of the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their own identities and cultures.

- Indigenous school education, thus conceived, shall also provide a means for the population to access universal information and knowledge

(scientific, philosophical, technological, aesthetic) essential to living in an interethnic society. Similarly correct, updated and anthropologically-based information and knowledge on indigenous peoples must be disseminated to non-indigenous sectors of the Brazilian population with the aim of developing intercultural and social relationships informed by respect, tolerance and comprehension of mutual differences and by the repudiation of all forms of discrimination and violence.

- Indigenous school education shall be included in the National Education System, under the terms by which it is defined in the Federal Constitution and the LDB. An Indigenous Schools Support Coordination Group and an Indigenous Education Committee will be run by the MEC, with ample representation of both indigenous peoples and specialists with substantial knowledge of the issues involved in indigenous school education.

- In relation to pedagogical and curricular guidelines, the National Policy for Indigenous School Education should be informed by the documents collectively produced and already available: “Guidelines for the National Policy for Indigenous School Education” (MEC 1993) and “Curriculum References for Indigenous Schools” (MEC 1998), which contain the principal demands of the indigenous movement in Brazil.

- In order to guarantee the effective construction of intercultural and bilingual education, the category ‘indigenous school’ shall be officially created within the teaching systems and legally regulated, guaranteeing the autonomy of the indigenous schools, both in the use of public resources and in the definition of their pedagogical and curricular projects. The latter must be elaborated locally, with the effective participation and authority of the indigenous community in all decisions relating to the operation of the school and preferably implemented by indigenous teachers.

- The continuity, strengthening, improvement, amplification and official recognition of the projects currently being implemented in indigenous areas for the construction of a differentiated school education will be guaranteed, including in relation to the demands of specific communities for indigenous schools from the fifth to eighth series.

- In relation to indigenous rights, the ‘affiliated classes,’ ‘rural schools’ or ‘rural extension classrooms’ found today in indigenous lands should be de-affiliated and regulated as autonomous indigenous schools.

- The conditions will be created for the formation of indigenous teachers and the professionalization of indigenous school administration, to be carried out ideally by members of the respective community.

- The state education systems will be responsible for indigenous school education, guaranteeing the possibility of formal agreements with municipalities, indigenous associations, universities and non-governmental organizations, when requested by the indigenous communities in question.

- The MEC should maintain, expand and strengthen the already existing lines and programs for funding educational projects, the elaboration and publication of specific teaching materials, including those needed to train indigenous teachers, to be implemented by indigenous and non-indigenous non-governmental organizations, universities or education departments.

- Indigenous teachers shall be assured specific training, undertaken while in employment, through ongoing programs that guarantee their access to the latest theories and methodologies relating to school teaching and learning, especially those concerning research, critical reflection and the collective building of knowledge.

- The state teaching systems shall establish the professionalization and public recognition of indigenous teachers and the regulation of the 'indigenous teacher' as a specific career with competitive exams and titles adapted to the sociocultural and linguistic particularities of the indigenous communities to which they belong and where they will teach.

- Providing access for, accompanying and maintaining indigenous students on higher education courses at public universities will be guaranteed, along with the possibility of creating specific higher education courses for indigenous teachers.

- Continuous training programs for non-indigenous professionals at all levels of the national education system involved with indigenous school education. These programs will be run with the indispensable assistance of specialists from universities and non-governmental organizations and should ensure information on the specific legislation on indigenous rights, and an introduction to knowledge on indigenous languages, societies and cultures in the country.

## Goals

- Enable the right of indigenous peoples and communities to build their own differentiated school education with official recognition and support from locally developed projects that meet the collective needs, demands, interests and projects of indigenous populations, respecting their lifestyles, worldviews, pedagogical processes, historical experiences and the situations of monolingualism, bilingualism or multilingualism experienced by them.

- Ensure the improvement of learning levels and quality teaching in indigenous schools, guaranteeing respect for indigenous sciences, conceptions and practices and for access to the knowledge of other cultures and civilizations.

- Legally regulate all the teaching establishments located in indigenous lands, characterizing them as ‘indigenous schools’ and ensuring that their operation respects the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain their languages, cultures and traditions, worldviews, their own learning processes, and their distinct ethnic and cultural identities.

- Guarantee that the indigenous school population and indigenous teachers have access to the material, financial and intellectual benefits available to other schools, assuring the schools and indigenous communities the right to free choice and autonomy in their use.

- Maintaining and expanding the lines of funding already existing in the MEC for indigenous school education and adapt – for the benefit of indigenous schools – support programs such as school libraries, school meals, TV Escola, teaching books and school transportation, and create new programs that meet the specific demands of indigenous schools.

- Create or structure and strengthen Indigenous Education Nuclei (NEIs) in the state education departments (and, where applicable, in the municipal departments), assuring they operate responsibly (as defined in Directive 559/91). These sectors have the task of promoting, monitoring and managing indigenous school education programs, training indigenous teachers, training indigenous education professionals and publishing specific teaching materials under the supervision of the MEC’s Indigenous Schools Support Coordination Group and in close dialogue with the indigenous communities from the region concerned.

- Publish, within two years, information and knowledge allowing the professionals involved with indigenous school education to understand clearly



and precisely the specific rights assured to indigenous peoples by Brazilian legislation. This information must be of sufficient depth to enable them to collaborate effectively with indigenous communities and teachers in the execution of educational projects that respect the autonomy of the indigenous school, the diversity of the situations experienced by indigenous populations in Brazil today and their projects for the future.

- Assure that every indigenous teacher attains the minimum level of qualification demanded by the LDB by providing access to specific programs via the National Education System. These programs will be elaborated and implemented through the coordinated and cooperative initiatives of government, indigenous organizations and communities, non-governmental civil society organizations and universities with recognized competence in the processes involved in indigenous schooling.

- Universalize the provision of educational programs to the indigenous population in Brazil within the space of ten years, respecting each community's options concerning the presence of the schools and their contents and methods, the age ranges to be taught, the school calendar and so on.

- At federal level create – with linguistic, anthropological and pedagogical assistance from specialists in indigenous issues and extensive indigenous participation – evaluation programs for the indigenous teaching training courses, the educational projects under way in indigenous areas and the performance of the departments responsible for indigenous education and the organizations responsible for specific projects, with the aim of improving indigenous school education in the country.

- Register indigenous school establishments and produce an indigenous school census, recording the demands of local communities, especially those referring to teaching from the fifth grade to higher education.

Translated by David Rogers