



Project promotes contact between students from Colégio de Aplicação and Brazilian native peoples' traditional knowledge

Rodrigo Flores / 19 de janeiro de 2024

Teaching | Activities seek to foster a more diverse viewing of Brazilian history and society by promoting a critical perspective on daily life

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*Entry to the Guarani Mbya exhibit, on display at UFRGS Museum, with the inscription "aguyjevete", a greeting expression in the Guarani language (Image: Ana Terra Firmino/ Dec. 2022).

A great hall opens in front of you, with a series of colorful banners standing out in the background. Approaching the banners, you see illustrations of black people, alongside names and brief biographies. The exhibit presents a wide range of public figures – *quilombola* leader Zumbi dos Palmares, activist Marielle Franco, musician Lupicínio Rodrigues, and writer Carolina de Jesus, among others. A few moments later, a large group of Mbyá Guarani adults, children, and teenagers with instruments, baskets, and headdresses enters the hall and stands in the inner courtyard. Then the students from Colégio de Aplicação (CAp), of UFRGS, arrive and stand in a semicircle. The music begins.

The scenario, which took place in November 2022, is part of an activity developed within CAp's Ethnic-Racial Relations Education program, formerly coordinated by Professor Tanise Muller in 2012. The idea emerged when a student who was observing an image from the textbook said "the indigenous people on [that] book are not like the ones I see in Porto Alegre". The referred image was [Victor Meirelles' A Primeira Missa do Brasil \[The First Mass of Brazil\]](#), a classic artwork painted more than 360 years after the historic event, a painting that represents a mythicized version of the encounter between the Portuguese and the Tupi, one of the indigenous peoples of Brazil. The Europeans and the cross are displayed in the center of the image, reverent and enlightened by rays of the sun, while the mass of naked natives huddles around in the woods and trees, indistinguishable from each other to the point of being blurred at the edges.

The opposition between reality and the textbook led Muller to seek for a closer contact with real indigenous villages. It was not easy: the first communities were not so receptive to the Professor's idea. Eventually, "someone at UFRGS told me about [Guarani chief] Vhera Poty," said Muller. "I discovered he was a young man who had already had contact with other professors and embraced the same idea of interaction," she added. On Muller got acquainted with Vhera Poty, the first visit of students from CAp to the Pindó Mirim Village took place and has since become annual. Members of the indigenous community have reciprocally started to visit the school.

As time went by, Muller discovered allies to her initiative, such as other teachers active in anti-racist education. Meanwhile, new ideas emerged, such as the desire to bring *mestres* [experts] from different backgrounds to the school to share their knowledge. One of these *mestres* is Gercy de Mattos, known as Mestre Cica, who teaches African diversity and the Yoruba language. "I don't have formal education, nor am I a formal teacher. I teach Yoruba, which I can because I am a representative in the Popular Cultures Sectorial Collegiate of the State of Rio Grande do Sul," Mestre Cica says, also praising the partnership with the University.

The program's biggest focus, however, is to promote critical thinking in everyday life. This is pursued through activities that aim to awaken scientific interest in children, activities which used to take place at the PUCRS Museum for Science and Technology but which are now also happening at the Pindó Mirim Village. Through these actions, students have contact not only with indigenous peoples but also with their way of life – one that perceives nature and interacts with it in ways unknown to most students.

The role of the project, more than to propose one-time activities, is to help and ensure society's compliance with [Law nº 11.645, of March 10, 2008](#). This legislation makes the teaching of Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, and African cultures compulsory in basic schooling. According to Law nº 11.645, the education for ethnic-racial relations (ERER in Portuguese) needs to go beyond an independent subject or activities on special holidays and must be "within the scope of the entire school curriculum".

Lucas Pesce, project scholarship holder and Social Sciences undergraduate student at UFRGS, points out that, although the obligation exists in theory, to put the Law into effect is very difficult.

"Teachers must be encouraged so that, based on their workplace and expertise, they can become educators for ethnic-racial relations, as recommended by the law"

— Lucas Pesce

To adapt to the legislation, Muller had to face resistance from both students' parents and colleagues. One episode involved a student's father, a military, who offered to place an army battalion between the indigenous people and the children, because "they [the indigenous people] can be aggressive and use you as hostages". In addition, Muller reports having colleagues who viewed the activities with disregard or discomfort. Nonetheless, she learned to work around some of these obstacles: "When I was younger, I used to hit head-on. Now I realize that if I do that, I lose an ally right away. I must go around the edges."

One of the project's main achievements is making it possible for indigenous people to visit the school. This relies at least on two conditions: transportation and meals. The first is always provided by UFRGS. The meals, on the other hand, can be offered by UFRGS' University Restaurants, which depends on a bureaucratic procedure that has, so far, worked out well.

The main obstacle concerns money: despite the legislation, there is no financing for the project. The guests, lecturers, and artists do not usually receive a fee – if they do, it is because sometimes participants voluntarily chip in. Lack of funding limits the reach of ERER, making it difficult to expand it to all school stages.

Continuity

Muller, however, teaches only the "alpha" grades (first to fifth grades of Elementary School). For this reason, the project is limited to these students and counts with no formal continuity in the following years. The students themselves point out this situation: "In the alphas, there is a work developed since first grade, and when we reach the following years of school, it seems that everything starts from scratch," says CAp seventh-grader Maria Fernanda Baialardy.

Noticing this to be the case, a group of 5 students endeavored to bring discussion concerning ethnic-racial relations to the following grades. The initiative paid off and even generated a more organized group. "Previously, our activities happened only online, once a week; now we meet in person in the teachers' room," says Baialardy. Among other things, the group raises racial-ethnic debates about issues in the students' daily lives. "We bring everyday stuff, things we see on the news. For example, some characters lost their ethnicity in live-action movies: why can't Ariel be black, while other characters are white?," she questions, referring to [recent racist attacks targeting actor Halle Bailey, who plays Ariel in the movie The Little Mermaid](#).

In a country whose population is mostly black and descendants of native peoples, promoting education beyond the "Western" universe can lead students to learn about themselves, their own cultures, and experiences, as well as those of others. The effects are already noticeable: the colonial and Eurocentric vision is crumbling and giving way to a more plural one. Victor Meirelles' "Indians" (that group of naked and "savage" people) is being replaced in children's imagination and experience by the 2022 teenagers with their *FreeFire* clothes, smartphones, and chants in Guarani.

Translated into English by [Isabel Chiele Cony Marques dos Santos](#), undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

:: Read in Portuguese

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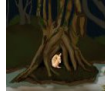
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