

Áurea Viana Moreira <sup>1</sup>

 0009-0008-6968-5614

Giovanna Rocha Leal

Araújo <sup>1</sup>

 0009-0001-6783-614X

Fernanda Gomes Lopes <sup>2</sup>

 0000-0003-1661-3816

<sup>1</sup> Universidade de Fortaleza.  
Fortaleza, Ceará, Brasil.

DOI

10.54620/cadesp.v20i1



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# Resistance, ancestry, and collectivity in indigenous education

*Resistência, ancestralidade e coletividade na educação indígena*

*Resistencia, ancestralidad y colectividad en la educación indígena*

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to report the experience of Psychology students in conducting a focus group with teachers and staff from an Indigenous school located in the municipality of Pacatuba, Ceará, seeking to understand the teaching profession and educational practices in this context. This is a qualitative study, structured as an experience report, carried out within an internship course, using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group as research techniques. The results showed that the Indigenous school functions as a space of cultural resistance, in which education is intrinsically connected to ancestry, spirituality, and collectivity. The observed pedagogical practices go beyond the hegemonic school model, valuing intergenerational knowledge transmission and collective work. It is concluded that the experience contributed to the appreciation of Indigenous knowledge and to strengthening the students' academic training, reaffirming the importance of research practices committed to the decolonization of knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Peoples; Education; Psychology.*

## RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo relatar a experiência de estudantes de Psicologia na condução de um grupo focal com professores e funcionários de uma escola indígena localizada no município de Pacatuba, Ceará, buscando compreender o ofício docente e as práticas educativas nesse contexto. Trata-se de pesquisa qualitativa, estruturada como relato de experiência, realizada em disciplina de estágio, utilizando observação participante, entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupo focal. Os resultados evidenciaram que a escola indígena se configura como um espaço de resistência cultural, no qual a educação está intrinsecamente articulada à ancestralidade, à espiritualidade e à coletividade. As

práticas pedagógicas observadas extrapolam o modelo escolar hegemônico, valorizando a transmissão intergeracional de saberes e o trabalho coletivo. Conclui-se que a experiência contribuiu para a valorização dos saberes indígenas e para a formação acadêmica das estudantes, reafirmando a importância de práticas de pesquisa comprometidas com a descolonização do conhecimento.

**Descritores:** *Povos Indígenas; Educação; Psicologia.*

## RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo relatar la experiencia de estudiantes de Psicología en la realización de un grupo focal con docentes y funcionarios de una escuela indígena ubicada en el municipio de Pacatuba, Ceará, con el fin de comprender el oficio docente y las prácticas educativas en este contexto. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, estructurada como un relato de experiencia, desarrollada en el marco de una asignatura de prácticas, utilizando la observación participante, entrevistas semiestructuradas y el grupo focal como técnicas de investigación. Los resultados evidenciaron que la escuela indígena se configura como un espacio de resistencia cultural, en el que la educación está intrínsecamente vinculada a la ancestralidad, la espiritualidad y la colectividad. Las prácticas pedagógicas observadas trascienden el modelo escolar hegemónico, valorando la transmisión intergeneracional de saberes y el trabajo colectivo. Se concluye que la experiencia contribuyó a la valorización de los saberes indígenas y al fortalecimiento de la formación académica de las estudiantes, reafirmando la importancia de prácticas de investigación comprometidas con la descolonización del conocimiento.

**Descriptores:** *Pueblos Indígenas; Educación; Psicología.*

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, indigenous school education in Brazil operated under a colonial logic of integration and assimilation, which imposed Eurocentric matrices and resulted in the systematic denial of the languages, cultures, and values of native peoples, promoting their epistemic and ontological invisibility. However, from the Federal Constitution of 1988, this model was tensioned by the achievement of an education that aims at the historical, ethnic and cultural continuity of these populations. In this scenario, the dialogue between intercultural education and decolonial studies has legitimized indigenous pedagogies as insurgent practices of resistance and liberation, which are no longer seen as folklore to consolidate themselves as essential methodologies that challenge the hegemony of Western modernity and the hierarchization of knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

Contemporary indigenous pedagogical practices articulate formal and community dimensions, integrating collective memory, cosmology and territoriality into the curriculum. In this scenario, teachers and leaders go beyond the conventional teaching function by leading school management and organizing teaching-learning through oral narratives, rituals and reciprocity. However, despite the normative advances that guarantee a differentiated education, these institutions face the dilemma of guaranteeing access to the technical-scientific knowledge of the surrounding society without compromising the transmission of traditional knowledge, much of which is not "schoolable" because it is restricted to the community<sup>1</sup>. This tension is underexplored by studies that describe concrete experiences and their interaction with fields such as Psychology, a fundamental science for understanding the dynamics of alienation and the processes of (re) humanization and decolonization in this context<sup>1</sup>.

In view of this, this article aims to report the experience of Psychology students with the realization of a focus group with teachers and employees of an indigenous school, located in the municipality of Pacatuba/Ceará. The activity sought to understand the teaching profession, the challenges experienced and the educational practices developed in this context, recognizing their knowledge, the central role of their community and the proper modes of pedagogical organization.

## METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative research, structured as an experience report, developed within the scope of an internship course of the Psychology course of a university located in Fortaleza. The qualitative approach allows access to the complexity of human experiences by privileging the interpretation of the meanings attributed by the subjects to their experiences and to the contexts in which they are inserted. From this perspective, the experience report is configured as a methodological

strategy that describes academic practices developed in the field, focusing on the training processes, the perceptions constructed and the learning produced by the authors throughout the activity carried out<sup>2,3</sup>.

The experience took place in an indigenous state school located in a traditional territory in the municipality of Pacatuba, in the state of Ceará. The context in which the institution is inserted is marked by a long history of struggles by the local population for demarcation and survival in the face of the advance of urbanization and the surrounding industries. Although formally institutionalized about eight years ago, the genesis of the school dates back to the community organization of the 1990s, when teaching was conducted by an elderly woman under the shade of a tree, using manually made notebooks to teach children to read and write.

Currently, the institution serves approximately 244 students, with an educational offer that ranges from Early Childhood Education to High School and Youth and Adult Education (EJA). The teaching staff is composed of 32 teachers, the vast majority of whom belong to the indigenous community itself, which ensures the centrality of local knowledge in pedagogical practice. The physical structure of the school comprises eight classrooms, a library, a computer lab, an auditorium and a sports court, spaces that are integrated with the surrounding nature, which acts as a living educational element.

The institution's curriculum is based on a differentiated education, which establishes a horizontal relationship between teachers and students and promotes the inclusion of non-indigenous students from the region and atypical children. In this proposal, traditional knowledge and spirituality are articulated with the mandatory subjects. Grammar is taught through reading, singing and dancing the toré; mathematics is explored in the making of handicrafts with beads; and the planting classes serve as a laboratory for the teaching of traditional medicine. This detail highlights a scenario where learning transcends the classroom, strengthening ethnic identity and cultural resistance.

Given the understanding of this context, the activities were distributed in three face-to-face meetings held in the second half of 2025. In the first two meetings, the field was reconnoitered and informal conversations and interviews were conducted with a local leader (the chief's daughter) and two teachers (one of whom was the community's shaman). These conversations aimed to understand the history of the institution's foundation, its pedagogical organization and the impacts of the craft on the lives of educators.

In the third meeting, a focus group was held with eight teachers (four women and four men) working from kindergarten to high school. The activity took place in the teachers' room, with the chairs arranged in a circle, favoring dialogue between the participants. The choice for this methodological procedure was based on its qualitative nature, which emphasizes group interaction as a way for the collective construction of meanings, based on dialogue and the circulation of experiences among the members<sup>2,3</sup>.

The selection of participants for the focus group followed criteria of

intentionality and convenience, seeking to represent different levels of education (from Early Childhood Education to High School) and ensure gender parity, in order to expand the diversity of experiences shared in the group. The invitation was formally made in a pedagogical meeting, with voluntary adherence by teachers who were available at the time of the activity.

As for the role of the researchers, they acted as horizontal mediators, being responsible for conducting the activities, organizing the space, proposing the dynamics and facilitating the dialogue among the participants. During the conduction, a sensitive and non-directive posture was adopted, facilitating the circulation of speech and ensuring that the space was not for technical evaluation, but for the shared construction of meanings.

The qualitative data analysis procedure was based on thematic analysis<sup>3</sup>. First, the researchers read the records contained in the field diaries (observation notes and focus group reports). Next, the discourses and meanings attributed to the dynamics (such as the choice to draw elements of nature and the selection of the generating images) were coded and grouped by similarity of meaning. Then, the data were organized into thematic axes that guided the presentation of the results, namely: the reverence for ancestry, the radical collectivity as a support for the craft, the materiality of differentiated education integrated with nature, and the challenges inherent to the teaching profession in this context.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the research was conducted in accordance with the principles set forth in Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council<sup>4</sup>. Considering that this is an experience report from pedagogical activity, without the collection of sensitive personal data, the study fits into the situations of exemption from submission to the CEP/CONEP. Even so, the principles of confidentiality were strictly observed, ensuring the anonymity of the school, the village and all participants.

## RESULTS

Insertion in the field began with a sensitive approach to local history. Previous conversations with the leadership and teachers revealed that the school is a historical symbol of resistance of the people of that region. The focus group operated as the main space for listening and sharing the research, being conducted based on the following triggering question: *"Who are you in the teaching work at this school?"* element. To respond to this provocation in a playful and reflective way, the intervention was structured in two sequential practical moments: an initial dynamic of construction of self-portraits and a main activity mediated by generative images.

At first, as a form of icebreaker, colored papers and pens were distributed so that the educators could draw something that represented them individually. There was an initial hesitation to focus on the isolated "I", which quickly turned into productions loaded with collective symbolism. Almost unanimously, the representations did not illustrate human figures, but elements of nature, such as

plants, roots and fruits. The general idea that emerged from this dynamic was that the teaching and personal identity of those subjects is inseparable from the territory and the environment, functioning as an extension of the land itself.

Then, several printed images with indigenous themes were spread, and the teachers were invited to choose those that best translated the daily life and challenges of their craft. From these choices and the reflections that followed, central axes of discussion emerged.

The first axis evidenced was the deep respect for ancestry. From the selection of a participant for the image that portrayed a female figure with bodily roots, the group debated the reverence for ancestors, affectionately referred to as "old trunks". The central idea shared was that of the transgenerational weight of the profession, mobilizing educators to express the feeling that the act of teaching was loaded with a double responsibility, that of honoring the memory and struggles of those who have already passed, while preparing future generations. This ancestral connection was recalled in the very origin of the school, which began under a tree, the result of the affectionate teaching of an elderly woman in the community.

Another axis debated was that of radical collectivity, driven by an image that showed a fabric being built by several hands. The educators brought general ideas about how community unity is what sustains the institution in the face of the frequent gaps of the State. It was reported, in general, that the teaching profession transcends the fulfillment of the curriculum and is materialized in actions of mutual support and self-management. Practical examples of this were the mentions of the voluntary apportionment of one's own salaries to ensure the feeding of younger classes and the payment of support professionals for atypical children, as well as the daily care among the team itself in the small gestures of sharing.

The materiality of differentiated education was also widely discussed by the group. The central idea that nature works as the main educator guided the reports on teaching methodologies. The participants described a daily life in which the formal curriculum is dynamically merged with traditions, exemplified by activities in which grammatical rules of the Portuguese language are taught to the rhythm of ritualistic dances, mathematical concepts are transmitted through the handmade making of beads, and traditional medicine is experienced in practical planting classes.

Despite the pedagogical power, the group space also served to share pains and challenges inherent to the profession. The group brought to light the strong prejudice faced, debating the violence suffered throughout their academic training in non-indigenous institutions, marked, for example, by constraints and prohibitions regarding the use of traditional paintings and clothing. In addition, teachers reported resistance that occurs in the school environment itself, such as the refusal of some students to participate in cultural practices due to the influence of religious strands that tend to "demonize" ancestral rituals. The

feeling expressed was that of wear and tear in the face of the continuous need for self-affirmation against identity erasure.

Finally, the activities showed that the focus group did not operate only as an instrument of investigation, but as a living device for collective listening. The exchange of ideas and the sharing of anxieties and victories consolidated an environment of mutual recognition and validation of knowledge, reaffirming that, for those educators, resisting, caring for the community and teaching are inseparable actions.

## DISCUSSION

The lived experience showed that the indigenous school transcends the mere transmission of curricular content, assuming the role of a political territory of identity affirmation and cultural resistance. This dynamic dialogues with decolonial pedagogies, which conceive education not as a neutral practice, but as an insurgent and essential methodology for social and epistemic struggles for liberation in the face of the coloniality of knowledge and being<sup>1</sup>. In this scenario of dispute, the teaching profession is resignified, as the institution ceases to operate under the old tutelary and assimilationist logic of the colonial State to assume the complex inverse mission, of ensuring the historical, ethnic and cultural continuity of the community<sup>5</sup>.

One of the most striking axes revealed was the experience of a radical collectivity, expressed vividly in self-managed strategies of mutual care, such as the sharing of financial resources by the educators themselves to support the students. This communitarian *ethos* is opposed to the hegemonic educational model with a neoliberal bias, which acts in the formation of subjects in a depoliticized way, based on competition, individualism and the preparation of labor for the market<sup>6</sup>. Contrary to this logic, indigenous educational practices are structured on interdependence and solidarity. As the specialized literature on the subject points out, in indigenous epistemologies "no one dances alone", which means that native pedagogy and the production of knowledge are unfeasible outside the strictly communitarian dimension and collective effort<sup>7</sup>.

The inseparability between pedagogical practice, nature and spirituality are central dimensions of this reflection. The strong identification of the participants with the territory (reflected in the drawings of plants and roots), the affirmation that "the forest teaches" and the reverence for "old trunks" find resonance in an ontology in which the environment is not seen as a mere inanimate resource, but as a living web of relationships and spiritual entities that form the basis of the people's own ancestry<sup>8</sup>. By integrating the formal curriculum with rites such as *toré* and the practical elements of the territory, educators break with the monopoly of Western writing-centric culture. This movement shows that complex learning processes go far beyond classical schooling, since many community knowledge is not even transmissible or limited to the molds of a conventional classroom<sup>5</sup>.

However, the narratives about the violence and embarrassment experienced by the teachers illustrate the weight of a colonial wound that is still open. These aggressions reinforce the fact that Brazilian society and official history have subjected indigenous

populations to a systematic process of invisibility, silencing and violence, often denying their status as contemporary historical subjects and criminalizing their struggles<sup>9</sup>. Dealing with this daily violence and facing discourses, postures and teaching materials that reduce indigenous cultural wealth to prejudiced, generic and backward stereotypes, requires teachers to make a continuous and exhaustive effort to counter-narrative<sup>10</sup>.

In the face of these complexities, the focus group's listening space confirmed that indigenous school education is not limited to a mere technical adaptation of the national curriculum. It is, fundamentally, a permanent field of tensions and intercultural translation, which seeks to guarantee access to the global knowledge of the dominant society, without giving up the societal and ontological projects of the village<sup>5</sup>. More than that, the intervention revealed that, for these educators, the collective act of teaching is a vital device of (re)existence and (re)humanization, which converts historical pain and the imperative of ancestry into pedagogical tools of liberation<sup>1</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study made it possible to understand how the indigenous school is constituted as a space of cultural resistance, identity strengthening and production of knowledge, in which the teaching profession remains articulated with ancestry, spirituality and community life. The results showed that the pedagogical practices developed in this context go beyond the hegemonic school logic, valuing collectivity, intergenerational transmission of knowledge and integration between education, territory and culture. These elements reaffirm the relevance of differentiated indigenous school education as a strategy to confront the coloniality of knowledge and to legitimize indigenous epistemologies in the educational field.

In addition, the experience proved to be significant for both the participating teachers and the student mediators, as it was configured as a space for listening, recognition and circulation of meanings. As a methodological and formative device, the focus group contributed to the valorization of historically silenced narratives and to the construction of an ethical, sensitive academic practice committed to the decolonization of knowledge. Finally, the importance of expanding research and interventions that strengthen the dialogue between universities and indigenous communities is highlighted, promoting greater visibility, recognition and respect for the knowledge and ways of life of these peoples.

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#### Corresponding Author

Áurea Viana Moreira  
[aureavianamoreira@gmail.com](mailto:aureavianamoreira@gmail.com)

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#### Author Contributions

**Supervision:** FGL; **Writing – original draft:** AVM, GRLA, FGL; **Writing – revision and editing:** AVM, GRLA.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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#### Funding

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#### Associate Editors

Bruno Neves da Silva, Genilton da Silva Faheina Junior E Sofia de Moraes Arnaldo

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#### How to Cite

Moreira AV, Araújo GRL, Lopes FG. Resistência, ancestralidade e coletividade na educação indígena. *Cadernos ESP*. 2026;20:e2642.

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**Received:** February 23, 2026

**Published:** June 8, 2026