What We Can Learn from Brazil

What a Small Indigenous School in São Paulo Taught Me About Culture, Curriculum, and Who Gets to Decide What Children Learn

By Jamie Goebel

Two hours outside São Paulo, the city slowly disappeared behind us. High-rises gave way to smaller communities. Pavement eventually gave way to a rougher road, and the Atlantic coast came into sight. When we arrived at Aldeia Piaçaguera, an Indigenous village in Peruíbe, there were no sprawling school buildings, elaborate athletic facilities, or rows of technology filled classrooms.

Instead, there was a small school.
Its two small buildings showed their age. Bright geometric patterns stretched across the walls. Children's artwork hung as decoration. Dogs wandered freely through the grounds. Children peeked through windows and eagerly waved as we arrived. But it wasn't the buildings that would define our first impression of the school, the was the students.

They came together to welcome us with a traditional ceremony presentation. The boys in black shorts, traditional jewelry, and black designs painted across their faces. Girls wore white woven skirts, cropped top, and red face paint. Children ranging from four years old through early teens stood barefoot together as they sang and danced with pride.

What struck me most was not what the school lacked. Rather, it was what they refused to lose. Their language. Their traditions. Their relationship with the land. Their music. Their food. Their art. Their history. Their identity.

Controlling the Education Narrative

The U.S. doesn't have a national public school curriculum. Education control is divided among federal, state, and local institutions. States establish academic standards and requirements, while local districts and their school boards control curriculum, instructional materials, and implementation.

In theory, local control allows educational partners to shape instruction around their students. But in practice, it makes curriculum vulnerable to political battles. In recent years, school board meetings across the country have become battlegrounds over race, gender, history, books, flags, and whose stories belong in classrooms.

In 2023, the school board in California's Temecula Valley Unified School District, rejected a state approved, teacher piloted and recommended elementary social studies curriculum after board objections arose over supplemental material mentioning Harvey Milk [1]. State Superintendent, Tony Thurmand threatened the district with a $1.5 million penalty before the curriculum was ultimately adopted due to their inability to provide curriculum to students in a timely manner [1].

In Missouri's Francis Howell School District, the board eliminated all elective courses in Black history and Black literature in 2023 [2]. The decision came after board members objected to the courses' social-justice framework [2].

Pennsylvania's Pennridge School District drew attention while revising its social studies curriculum after considering materials from Hillsdale College's 1776 Curriculum [3]. The resulting revisions increased emphasis on Colonial America, the American Revolution, and the Constitution and reduced instruction on Native Americans in elementary schools [3].

These disputes vary in context and communities on opposing sides offer competing explanations. But collectively they raise an important question: When curriculum becomes a political prize, where does that leave students?

Beyond our Boarders

Brazil educates approximately 37 million students through its public education system [4]. Made up of 26 states, their most populous state, São Paulo, accounts for over 7 million public school students [4]. Meaning, one Brazilian state operates a public education system equivalent to roughly one-seventh the size of the entire U.S. public school system. Yet its governance structure differs substantially from ours.

São Paulo's State Department of Education plays a much more centralized role in establishing curriculum and instructional expectations for its schools compared to U.S. schools [4]. It was during my visit that I learned just how hands-on the Department really is. The impressive state-of-the-art building houses offices, teacher classrooms, and a large auditorium, while its hallways display artifacts documenting generations of educational development.

Brazil faces serious educational challenges of its own. Centralization doesn't eliminate politics and doesn't guarantee educational equity. But something São Paulo has done

particularly caught my attention. It has established a place within its public education where Indigenous education can maintain its own identity.



Reimaging Public School

With over 12,000 Indigenous students attending São Paulo public schools, 1,023 of them attend one of the 42 schools located within Indigenous villages [5]. Although this is a relatively small share of enrollment of Indigenous students, it doesn't make their histories, languages, or cultures less significant. These schools serve five Indigenous peoples, the Tupi-Guarani, Guaranu Mbyá, Tereba, Krenak, and Kaingang, and operate under a state model designed to preserve language, culture, and traditional tribal knowledge [5].

The state has established Indigenous schools within Indigenous communities. Rather than requiring these schools to reproduce a conventional curriculum, São Paulo's Indigenous education policy recognizes education as differentiated, intercultural, and multilingual [5]. São Paulo's 2026 guidelines require schools to strengthen and revitalize Indigenous languages and traditions while connecting those knowledge systems with knowledge from outside the community [5].

A Seat at the Curriculum Table

The biggest different isn't what São Paulo teaches, it's who has a voice in deciding what is taught. The state isn't creating Indigenous education in isolation and giving out completed curriculum to village schools. Indigenous teachers, elders, leaders, students, and communities have shaped what their education should look like. Reflected in the mirror of their curriculum is the partnership between the Indigenous communities and São Paulo. Indigenous educators have participated in 66 language revitalization workshops to develop their own instructional materials, including dictionaries, grammar, and sacred stories [6]. Rather than having outsiders write about their cultures, Indigenous educators helped create the

books that carry their languages, histories, and knowledge into their classrooms. The state, in turn, provides the infrastructure and partnerships to help produce, train, and distribute those materials.

The same principle extends to curriculum. São Paulo's model allows Indigenous schools to connect required academic learning with the knowledge and traditions of each community. Indigenous teachers and community members help determine how language, history, spirituality, the environment, traditional practices, and other forms of knowledge become part of education.

This relationship was not love at first sight. Indigenous educators and leaders spent years advocating for greater autonomy, culturally appropriate curriculum, Indigenous teacher training, and meaningful participation in educational decisions. The result, a partnership in which Indigenous communities help decide how their children are educated and whose knowledge belongs in the classroom. Researchers at UNIFESP describe working with Indigenous teachers, elders, and knowledge holders from the five São Paulo peoples to determine which community knowledge should become instructional resources [6]. That collaboration has already produced three books of games, activities and guidance for Indigenous teachers, with the games distributed to Indigenous schools across São Paulo [6].

On paper, this partnership sounds promising, but two hours outside the offices of São Paulo's State Department of Education, I had the opportunity to see what it looked like in real life. At Aldeia Piacaguera, curriculum was not confined to a state document, a textbook, or even on the walls of a classroom. It was woven into the fabrics of the village.



Culture and Teaching Collide

Aldeia Piaçaguera is a Tupi-Guarani Indigenous community along Brazil's Atlantic coast in Peruíbe [7]. The village's school is small with just over 30 students [7]. The size of the school was almost irrelevant once we began seeing how education came to life.

We spoke with education officials, teachers, and tribal elders about how the curriculum incorporates the culture of the community into children's education. Students learn conventional academic content, but their education also makes room for language, farming, cooking, art, music, dance, and knowledge passed between generations. Village Elders and are not treated as outsiders. Instead, their knowledge has tremendous educational value and a daily presence at school.

Learning doesn't end in the classroom. After sharing a traditional meal, we walked with students toward the Atlantic Ocean. The path itself became a lesson. As we moved through protected land and crossed small streams, students pointed out berries, roots, mud, seeds, leaves, and other natural resources. They explained their traditional uses, including medicinal and ornamental purposes.

Uno Reverse the Question

In the United States, conversations about Indigenous education frequently begin with a different question: What should we teach students about Indigenous peoples? Instead, we should be asking: What should Indigenous communities be empowered to teach their children and the rest of us?

A textbook chapter about Indigenous history cannot reproduce what I witnessed walking toward the Atlantic with students from Aldeia Piaçaguera. A paragraph about traditional medicine cannot replace learning from people who possess that knowledge. A unit on Indigenous culture cannot fully replicate a school in which culture lives throughout the educational experience. And perhaps most importantly, Indigenous students should not have to leave their identity outside the schoolhouse door in order to receive a public education.

Small Numbers, BIG Importance

It's easy for education systems to make decisions based on percentages.

Less than 1%. A few hundred students. Thirty students in a school. One small village. But children are not percentages. A population does not need to constitute 10, 25, or 50 percent of an education system before its language, culture, and history become worthy of preservation.

São Paulo's Indigenous schools are tiny when placed beside a public education system serving millions. Maintaining differentiated curriculum, preparing Indigenous educators, developing culturally relevant materials, and preserving Indigenous languages

requires effort for a relatively small number of students.

After years of advocacy by São Paulo's five Indigenous tribes, the state has increasingly recognized their right to an education that preserves their languages, cultures, and traditional knowledge. They fought because they are a part of Brazil's history, present, and future.



What America Can Learn

Brazil's education system shouldn't be romanticized. The country continues to confront profound inequalities involving poverty, geography, race, educational access, infrastructure, and achievement gaps. Indigenous communities themselves continue to struggle over land, political recognition, resources, and educational rights. This is not an argument that Brazil has solved Indigenous education. Nor is it an argument that the U.S. should simply copy São Paulo's educational system. The lesson is much simpler.

Schools can establish common academic expectations while recognizing that communities possess knowledge that cannot always be captured by a textbook. Teachers can teach history while acknowledging that there is more than one perspective from which that history can be understood. Governments can establish curriculum while leaving space for communities to preserve language, traditions, and knowledge. Students can learn that becoming educated won't make them less like the culture they came from.

When I think back to Aldeia Piaçaguera, I don't think about a policy, document, or statistic. I remember the children, the bright geometric shapes painted against an aging school wall, bare feet on the floor, black and red paint across young faces, handmade jewelry, music, laughter, and dancing. I remember walking toward the Atlantic while children showed us what grew around

them and what those plants meant to their community. And I remember realizing that this little public school was doing something extraordinarily important. It was teaching children about the world without asking them to surrender their own.

References

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