

Alternate Education Embraces Cultural Confidence in Children

By Simone Bender

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It was Amidst the jungled communities of rural Argentina and Brazil that humanities teacher and activist Erik Szabados first recognized the detrimental effects of cultural isolation in education: students displeased with their identities, ashamed of their familial backgrounds, and even self-conscious of elements as innate as their hair. Indigenous marginalization was a systemic hindrance on education, and yet, in programs not seen anywhere else, social strides were being made in schools.

Quilombola school systems, such as Comunidade Indigena Tres Unidos where Szabados researched, have changed the scope of state-approved education by prioritizing the celebration and exploration of Indigenous Brazilian cultures.

“Instead of seeing education as a tool of elites, it can be a means to empower whole communities,” said Szabados. “They come up with curriculum that is specific to their communities, their languages, and their traditions because Indigenous culture is constantly under threat.”

Szabados said that by taking students out of classroom confines, schools are aiming to eliminate cultural dilution and ultimately foster student confidence through the normalization of learning and sharing heritage. This is done through the teaching of the arts and use of nature in curriculum.

“There was this saying: ‘Be behind a desk so you’re not behind a plow.’ Quilombola schools are saying no, this is not valuing agricultural work,” said Szabados. “So instead, there is this embracing of we are all going to work the land *and* learn. They get to go canoe, they get to go to the jungle, they get to sing and dance.”

Today, there are over 2,400 operational Quilombola and Indigenous school systems across Brazil and Argentina, which have all been built on these ideals of unconventional cultural prioritization. Szabados said that the effects their curriculum have had on the socialization of local youth have benefitted society and identity confidence dramatically and that if implemented in the United States education system, the influence could be even more beneficial.

“Here, diversity is our strength. The current racist movement to erase women and people of color doesn’t just erase their contributions, it erases all of us. In our education system, we need to acknowledge that people bring different experiences, which enriches all of us,” said Szabados. “With the kids in the Indigenous schools, everyone was given a place. It empowers everyone to be happy and proud of who they are because they know they’re contributing the way others got to.”

Szabados said that the unity he felt emulating from those Quilombola-style schools was unmatched, and that the emotions that arose from his experience during observation are worthy of being brought to American education in pursuit of cultural fulfillment.

“We’re going to work together. We’re going to fight together. We’re going to honor our ancestors’ heritage and set the course for future generations,” said Szabados. “There’s this moment of... really feel[ing] yourself in every moment when we build curriculum for these Indigenous schools that sticks out.”

As Szabados spoke more with the children of the Brazilian communities, the immense influence of these schools on their self-identification became clear. Cultural shame changed to celebration, familial

embarrassment became pride, and self-consciousness was replaced with celebration. The impact of Quilombola-style education had proven to be beneficial in student confidence and capability.

“Identity is not defined by size and number, but by lived experience and shared visions of common trajectory,” said Szabados. “This is valuable. This is the future. The first thing we need is the idea of INdigenous education everywhere.”