Developing a Decolonized Approach to Early Childhood Development with the Indigenous Communities of the Upper Rio Negro

By Ruth Rosalle, Helen Walsh, Jasmine Lam and James Radner, with the Saving Brains Learning Platform Team

November 11, 2021

Background

The Brazilian non-governmental organization (NGO) Usina da Imaginação and the US-based NGO Shine a Light started the CanalCanoa project in 2012 with Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva's post-doctoral research on performance and narrative among Indigenous children. The project engages with Indigenous communities in the Amazon to document on film stories, songs, practices and reflections relating to traditional child rearing. CanalCanoa then shares the films for discussion in democratic community sessions, creating a space where traditional knowledge is recognized and reaffirmed, so the community can use it to support child development.

About this Brief: This case brief is part of a series exploring practical lessons from ongoing innovations for early childhood development, made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.

Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva and Kurt Shaw, the Co-Executive Directors of Usina da Imaginação, highlighted that the CanalCanoa team adopted an intentionally decolonized approach to the work. Rather than starting with an assumption that Indigenous communities of the Amazon somehow lack the capacity to foster child development, the team understood that these communities have rich child rearing practices that are under pressure from urbanization and colonization. The traditions encourage contact with nature, curiosity-based learning, autonomous collective play, and children learning alongside adults. Families traditionally include parents who speak different first languages, providing young children the benefit of a multilingual environment. However, urbanization and colonization can break traditional



PHOTO CREDIT: NATÁLIA CORRÊA

knowledge-sharing and social networks, and government policies and projects can create tension with traditional approaches.

For example, traditional learning styles are child-initiated. Kurt Shaw pointed to the words of Casemiro Sampaio, the shaman of the Tukano village of Balaio:

> *In Indigenous cultures, children are the agents of their own education. Children go to adults and ask to learn how to hunt and fish and farm – and in the process they are learning about medicine, [and] the stories of their people. That's when they're learning philosophy, [and] that's when they're learning ethics. Kids start the process.*

However, in mainstream culture, learning in school is initiated by adult teachers, who select the class's topics. The result is a rupture in Indigenous education, since "children are growing up to think that the adult has to call them to learn, and adults think that the child has to come to them in order to learn."

Indigenous parents, children, and their communities face poverty, exclusion, hunger during the rainy season, infant mortality, high rates of malarial infection and pulmonary diseases, and a lack of access to healthcare. In response to this wide range of disruptions and challenges, CanalCanoa worked to show that the strengths of Indigenous culture can be the seed of an integrated public policy for young children and their parents, with the understanding that the solutions for these problems must emerge from the best practices of Indigenous people.

Izoneia Araújo is a Tariana intellectual with a university degree in biology who worked as an educator with CanalCanoa. She explained:

> *Our tradition of caring for children starts with pre-natal care — a shaman and a midwife work with the mother to prepare her body and the place where the child will be received into the world. My father is a shaman, and he taught me that these blessings protect the baby from the spirits of the forest, but I am also a biologist: the care we take with cleanliness and medicinal herbs also protects from bacteria and disease.*

The Program

At the heart of CanalCanoa is the co-creation, with Indigenous people, of films documenting and explaining traditional child rearing. Indigenous leaders, children, midwives, grandparents, mothers and fathers, and other community members participate as partners in producing the films. Then, to share and discuss the films, community leaders and Indigenous mediators facilitate community gatherings called *ajuris de conhecimento*. The CanalCanoa

team notes that *ajuri* means "collective effort" in Nheengatu and suggests "knowledge barn-raising sessions" as an English rendering of the full phrase. As the name indicates, the *ajuris de conhecimento* were designed to be deeply collaborative and democratic, in accord with Indigenous approaches to meetings and festivals.

The films and *ajuris de conhecimento* are organized around seven themes that local communities identify as priorities for child development: (1) pregnancy and childbirth; (2) child stimulation; (3) language and song; (4) education; (5) protection and care; (6) orientation; and (7) public health. Each *ajuri* opens with a series of short animated movies made by Indigenous children, with material on, for example, local myths and stories, how to prepare staple food items, or how to make toys, crafts, and pieces of art. After these introductory videos, the group watches a 10 –12-minute film about one of the seven themes outlined above. To build on the film's message, older Indigenous leaders then share their insights and experiences on topics such as what childhood had been like for them, what they understood to be the best ways to stimulate and protect children, or how to best support women during pregnancy and childbirth. The Indigenous mediators then facilitate a one-hour conversation with families and encourage them to become agents of change in their communities. The discussions allow participants to reflect on child rearing practices in their local community or city, and on how this relates to their own circumstances, based on what they saw in the film. Participants return for seven weeks of conversations.

Films highlighting Indigenous voices and perspectives on ECD included in the ajuris:

- **Public Policy**: https://vimeo.com/357015971
- **Child Stimulation**: https://vimeo.com/357007417



PHOTO CREDIT: RITA DE CÁCIA OENNING DA SILVA

The *ajuris* gather in diverse community settings, notably in cities and towns. During *ajuris*, participants share traditional meals from the region, including açai, game, fish, and other items prepared using traditional methods, which are often unavailable or inaccessible in urban settings. As Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva observed, the *ajuris* help families to see their own cultural models as valid again after they have been challenged by new models imposed by the dominant culture in Brazil. The events also recreate the democratic meetings in the great house that structure community life in the village.

Because both men and women are essential to the cultural process of caring for and educating young children, men participated in every stage of the project. *Pajés* (shamans) and *baiás* (cantors) – generally men in the culture of the Rio Negro – were fundamental in scripting and filming, and almost 40% of the participants in the *ajuris* were male, including many community leaders. Many of these leaders then adopted early childhood as one of their missions as they work for changes in community life and public policy, as well as adapting the way they educate and care for their own children and grandchildren.

The form and content of the films and *ajuris* are rooted in Indigenous traditions and practices. At the same time, the work was informed by Paulo Freire's idea of dialogical education and Mikhail Bakhtin's insistence on the need to negotiate multiple voices in any one work, as well as Judith Butler's philosophy of the performance of identity.

CanalCanoa showed the seven movies to over 50 groups of 10 –15 parents from 24 Indigenous communities, who viewed and discussed the films over the course of two months. While 1,186 adults participated in the *ajuris* and 1,148 children participated in the project, CanalCanoa estimates that the project indirectly benefited 44,000

Thematic Focus: Care and Protection

André Baniwa, an Indigenous leader from the Baniwa community in the Upper Rio Negro, highlighted caring, or *ittimatakhetti* in Baniwa, as a central aspect of Baniwa conceptualization of child rearing. Caring in this context incudes caring for the future; it begins at conception and the early stages of gestational development, with the idea that children will develop well through their lives. From this perspective, what parents exemplify, consume, and share with their children (even prenatally) influences their wellbeing, and children's own approach to caring, throughout their lives. As André Baniwa put it, "Before we come into the world, it's so important to know that someone is protecting us, even before we're alive. That becomes a model of care for the whole life, where people are caring for us before we're born, through our lives, and then after death."

Perhaps the most important change in social relationships has to do with affection and love. "I like babies. There's no reason to be ashamed of it, you know?" reflected Eunice Salgado, a Baré midwife. In the project evaluation, many mothers – and especially fathers – said that the city demands so much from them: working, earning money, being seen spending money, community service, activism, church. With traditional Indigenous childcare on the movie screen, adults and older children once again felt as if they had a right to show love for babies and young children. They could be respected and recognized for that.

people; the themes and connections radiated through Indigenous communities, and participating families shared the movies in other settings on their own initiative. The evaluation conducted at the end of the *ajuris* showed promising results on all three domains of inquiry selected for assessment: 1) intellectual stimulation, 2) nutrition and healthcare, and 3) supportive relationships.[1] In interviews, 91% of participants reported that after the *ajuris* they spoke with their children and grandchildren more often in Indigenous languages, told more stories, and sang more. Eunice Salgado, a Baré midwife, explained, "I speak Nheengatu. My grandchildren need to hear Nheengatu. But I always spoke with them in Portuguese. I thought, 'Why am I speaking Portuguese?' I start to speak to my family in Nheengatu again." The evaluation also found that the *ajuris* increased the sharing of best practices to treat children's ailments, improved intergenerational relationships, fostered a space for women to discuss their sexuality, and inspired participants in urban areas to plant and grow healthy foods at home.

Opportunities and Challenges from Geographic and Linguistic Diversity

To create films that embody Indigenous knowledge, CanalCanoa visited, partnered with, and listened to communities across the Upper Rio Negro region. This was no easy task, given the extraordinary geographic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the region. Remote towns, like São Gabriel da Cachoeira, are accessible only by plane or boat, and reaching many villages requires a 15-day canoe trip. There was also a wealth of linguistic diversity in the region, with 22 languages spoken among 27 ethnic groups.

Though this diversity did present practical challenges, the CanalCanoa team preferred to view it as an opportunity. According to Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva,

> *The Indigenous people themselves were the ones who were the teachers in this process, and for many of these very long trips [to communities] that was essential, because it was our allies who would go upriver and would be able to talk in [languages from the region].*

The CanalCanoa team recruited speakers from every major language group in the Upper Rio Negro, except for Yanomami and Nadehup. As a result, CanalCanoa was able to collaborate with 24 of the 27 ethnic groups in the region.

---

[1] Kurt Shaw & Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva, "Look Upstream: Measurement for Innovation on the Upper Rio Negro of the Amazon Basin." *Frontiers in Pediatrics* 8 (2021):567257. doi: 10.3389/fped.2020.567257

At the same time that CanalCanoa strives to value diverse Indigenous cultures and practices around early childhood, it also works to show that parents from other cultures can learn from them. As the CanalCanoa team reflected:

> *The science of early childhood has shown that mainstream culture needs many of the practices that Indigenous people value: care and respect for children's ideas, quality in nature with people they love, allowing children to play freely with peers without having their lives controlled by the calendar, and seeing childhood as valuable in itself, not only as a step on the road to adulthood. In this way, everyone can see that the diversity of Indigenous cultures brings something to all children and families.*

Reflections on Technology



PHOTO CREDIT: KURT SHAW

For Indigenous communities in the Upper Rio Negro, the use of technology – digital video – and the space created by *ajuris* brought participants across age groups together to spread teaching, learning and cultural affirmation by and among Indigenous people. In this way, the Indigenous communities mobilized a technology derived from the mainstream culture for their own purposes. André Baniwa observed that making and watching the films inspired young people to learn and to reach out to their parents about what they had seen during the *ajuris*. For preschool aged children, watching these films helped build an important connection to Indigenous history. For the oldest community members, for whom communication is more verbal than written, films were a medium for engagement, in a way that text could not be. André Baniwa concluded that technology has the potential to enable communities like the Baniwa people to weave together threads of their culture, teachings and knowledge intergenerationally.

> *"It's not technology that's the problem, it's who gets to use technology and who is used by the technology."*
>
> - *André Baniwa, Indigenous Community Leader*

With this approach to using technology, CanalCanoa is now extending its activity into the Xingu River and the south of Brazil, teaching Indigenous women from many parts of Brazil how to document their own child rearing practices in dramatically different contexts.





PHOTO CREDIT: RITA DE CÁCIA OENNING DA SILVA

Perspective on Program Adaptation

In one common approach to "cultural adaptation," a program or curriculum is designed in a foreign or mainstream cultural setting, and then modified for implementation in a new or Indigenous context. The CanalCanoa team reflected that the *ajuris de conhecimento* effectively reversed this sequence. Here, the "curriculum" is based on Indigenous elders' and shamans' traditional knowledge and practices that originated in rural settings. As they discussed that material in the *ajuris*, Indigenous people in urban communities themselves adapted traditional, rural child rearing approaches so they could be applied to their own lives in cities and towns in Brazil.

As the Tukano leader Jacinta Sampaio explained, "Today we must have Indigenous doctors who believe in Indigenous medicine and Indigenous thought." When CanalCanoa calls attention to these ideas of the Indigenous "good life," it creates the possibility of an intercultural dialogue with public policy:

> *"If you're truly having a decolonized perspective, that demands that I say that the other knows and that the other has something to teach me."*
>
> - *Kurt Shaw, Co-Executive Director, Usina da Imaginação*

References

Shaw, Kurt & Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva. "Look Upstream: Measurement for Innovation on the Upper Rio Negro of the Amazon Basin." *Frontiers in Pediatrics* 8 (2021):567257. doi: 10.3389/fped.2020.567257

Shaw, Kurt & Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva. "CanalCanoa: strengthening indigenous values to improve early childhood development." *Early Childhood Matters* (November 2020). Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The work of the Saving Brains Learning Platform Team to engage with this innovation and prepare this profile was made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.

Unlocking the potential for development.

For more information about **Saving Brains** and **Grand Challenges Canada**, please visit: www.grandchallenges.ca

We extend a thank you to all the participants who co-created the CanalCanoa program, for their work and for sharing their stories with us.

For more information about **Usina da Imaginação** and **CanalCanoa**, please visit their website: https://usinadaimaginacao.org/laboratorios/canal-canoa/ and this article: https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2020/canalcanoa-strengthening-indigenous-values-to-improve-early-childhood-development/