

CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERCULTURALITY AT THE  
UNIVERSITY

*EPISTEMOLOGIA CONTEMPORÂNEA E POVOS INDÍGENAS NO ENSINO  
SUPERIOR: O DESAFIO DA INTERCULTURALIDADE NA UNIVERSIDADE*

*EPISTEMOLOGÍA CONTEMPORÁNEA Y PUEBLOS INDÍGENAS EN LA  
EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: EL DESAFÍO DE LA INTERCULTURALIDAD EN LA  
UNIVERSIDAD*



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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this text is to reflect on the entry of indigenous students into Higher Education, in view of the challenge of intercultural and interepistemic dialogues. This is a Bibliographic Research, whose approach is qualitative, which sought to identify the main contributions regarding the challenges of interculturality in Higher Education in Brazil, with emphasis on the interrelationship between indigenous peoples, interculturality and the University. To do so, we dialogue with authors who contribute to this debate, from contemporary epistemology, from the perspective of decoloniality and interculturality, as critical approaches to reflection. The data show the needs and importance of affirmative action in Higher Education, but also the need to question, in addition to the absence of indigenous peoples in universities, the pedagogical practices regulated by the dominant scientific rationality, since knowledge has always been used as an instrument of hierarchical classification and reinforcement of patterns of power and knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** University education. Indigenous students. Epistemology. Interculturality.

**RESUMO:** *O objetivo deste texto é refletir sobre o ingresso de estudantes indígenas no Ensino Superior, tendo em vista o desafio dos diálogos interculturais e interepistêmicos. Trata-se de uma Pesquisa Bibliográfica, cuja abordagem é qualitativa, que buscou identificar as principais contribuições acerca dos desafios da interculturalidade no Ensino Superior no Brasil, com destaque para a inter-relação povos indígenas, interculturalidade e Universidade. Para tanto, dialogamos com autores que contribuem para esse debate, a partir da epistemologia contemporânea, na perspectiva da decolonialidade e da interculturalidade, como abordagens críticas de reflexão. Os dados evidenciam as necessidades e a importância das ações afirmativas no Ensino Superior, mas também a necessidade de questionar, para além da ausência dos povos indígenas nas Universidades, as práticas pedagógicas reguladas pela racionalidade científica dominante, já que o conhecimento sempre foi utilizado como instrumento de classificação hierárquica e de reforço de padrões de poder e saber.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Ensino Superior. Povos indígenas. Epistemologia. Interculturalidade.*

**RESUMEN:** *El objetivo de este texto es reflexionar sobre el ingreso de estudiantes indígenas a la Educación Superior, ante el desafío de los diálogos interculturales e interepistémicos. Se trata de una Investigación Bibliográfica, cuyo enfoque es cualitativo, que buscó identificar las principales contribuciones sobre los desafíos de la interculturalidad en la Educación Superior en Brasil, con énfasis en la interrelación entre los pueblos indígenas, la interculturalidad y la Universidad. Para ello, dialogamos con autores que aportan a este debate, desde la epistemología contemporánea, desde la perspectiva de la decolonialidad y la interculturalidad, como enfoques críticos de reflexión. Los datos muestran las necesidades e importancia de las acciones afirmativas en la Educación Superior, pero también la necesidad de cuestionar, además de la ausencia de indígenas en las universidades, prácticas pedagógicas reguladas por la racionalidad científica dominante, pues el conocimiento siempre ha sido utilizado como instrumento de clasificación jerárquica y refuerzo de patrones de poder y saber.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Educación Superior. Pueblos indígenas. Epistemología. Interculturalidad.*

## Introduction

The Brazilian State has always used a variety of strategies to integrate indigenous peoples into national society, as they were seen, most of the time, as an obstacle to development, under the argument of “economic development”, “progress” and, more recently, “democracy” and “human rights”. Since the colonial period, there has been a strong attempt to “nationalize” the indigenous population, which has historically experienced situations of oppression, injustice, violence and exclusion, resulting from the merciless process of capitalist exploitation. Estimates indicate that there were around 5 million people living in the current Brazilian territory when Pedro Álvares Cabral arrived in 1500 (Luciano, 2006, p. 17).

Luciano (2006), an indigenous intellectual from the Baniwa people, observes that the violent process of colonization, which caused death, expulsion and expropriation of territories, meant that indigenous peoples today <sup>3</sup>began to depend on the State's welfare protection to survive. In recent years, this need for assistance from the Brazilian State has increased due to the growing number of murders of indigenous people. In 2021, according to data from the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), generated by the Mortality Information System (SIM) and state health departments, there were 38 murders of indigenous people in Amazonas, 35 in Mato Grosso do Sul and 32 in Roraima (CIMI, 2021). SESAI data classifies 124 deaths as “unassisted deaths” (Rangel; Liebgott, 2021, p. 21).

Added to this violence is the lack of access by the indigenous population to basic services, contributing to marked social inequality. In the context of the Brazilian Amazon, for example, for a series of reasons, this situation has directly influenced decisions <sup>4</sup>to leave school early and, consequently, not to have access to universities. And this can be problematized when we bring into the discussion the right to Education, which is still very recent in Brazil, as access to school for the poorest groups only began to materialize in the last decades of the 20th century. Thus, social inequalities have been translating into inequality of access, entry and permanence in Higher Education institutions. From this perspective, the objective of this text is to reflect on the entry of indigenous students into Higher Education, taking into account the challenge of intercultural and interepistemic dialogues.

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<sup>3</sup>The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2012) showed that in 2010 Brazil registered 305 indigenous peoples, speaking 274 languages. However, a more recent assessment of the 2022 Census shows that in just over a decade the population that considers itself indigenous has grown by at least 66% in Brazil. Data available at: <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2023>. Accessed on: 10 June. 2023.

<sup>4</sup>Among the related issues, we highlight the difficult access to schools in rural areas, as in the Brazilian Amazon there are many communities located in regions far from schools; there is an urgency to enter the job market to help the family; Many schools do not operate at night due to the lack of electricity.

This is bibliographical research, whose approach is qualitative, which sought to identify, collect and analyze the main contributions regarding the challenges of interculturality in Higher Education in Brazil, with emphasis on the interrelationship with indigenous peoples. For Gil (2002, p. 44, our translation), this type of research “is developed based on already prepared material, consisting mainly of books and scientific articles”. The starting point is the survey and review of works already published on the theoretical and methodological foundations that will guide this study, in order to gather and analyze the sources that provide the basis for this scientific work. With regard to the qualitative approach, Minayo (2007, p. 24, our translation) observes that “[...] we work with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes”, based on which seeks to understand and interpret reality.

The search for works already published started from the combination of the following keywords: *Higher Education*, *Indigenous People* and *Interculturality*, used in the Catalog of Theses and Dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Among the criteria adopted for the selection of theses and dissertations, we chose those published between 2014 and 2023, the last ten years; and works that actually highlighted the problems of access, entry and permanence of indigenous people in Higher Education institutions, and also discussed the challenge of interculturality in this process. As a criterion, we also prioritize reading the abstracts, introductions and conclusions to select the works to be read in full, with the aim of deepening the information.

Furthermore, some filters were applied in the search: the major area of knowledge was Human Sciences; the area of knowledge was Education; Both the area of concentration and evaluation was also Education; and we focused our searches on postgraduate programs in Education. 23 works were compiled that approached the debate, 13 dissertations and 10 theses. However, in this text we dialogue with those who contributed most to the discussion of the topic addressed in this study: Calderoni (2015), Borniotto (2017), Brito (2016), Doebber (2017), Pereira (2018), and Santos (2018).

The text is organized into two sections, in addition to the introduction and final considerations. In the first section we address the issue of social inequalities and the challenge of Higher Education for indigenous peoples in Brazil. In the second, we highlight issues related to the challenges facing Universities when indigenous peoples enter, focusing on the challenges of intercultural and interepistemic dialogues.

## Social inequalities and the challenge of Higher Education for indigenous peoples in Brazil

The increase in the number of indigenous people in public and private Universities in Brazil was only significant from the 2000s onwards, when Higher Education institutions began to deal with the complexity of this phenomenon, which required and demands, above all, a rethinking of the old academic structures in a new scenario, now constituted in difference and marked by the multicultural and pluriethnic experience within it. However, this new configuration requires relationships and other forms of interaction, as well as new ways of producing and approaching knowledge.

Even though we are already experiencing this new scenario, which is under construction, it is worth noting that there are many challenges for it to truly be consolidated, given that in Brazil the process of inferiorization of the indigenous population tends to be naturalized and made invisible since the 16th century with colonialism. Such practices present themselves as a reflection of a historical continuity that tends to project the violence suffered in the past into the present.

With regard to indigenous peoples, the impact of the colonial project is mainly reflected in the historical violence practiced against them, which translates more effectively into slavery, Christianization and contamination by diseases introduced by the colonizers, in addition to an unprecedented ethnocide, which caused one of the greatest demographic catastrophes in the history of humanity (Chambouleyron *et al.*, 2011).

Indigenous people were the first group enslaved in Brazil, when the country was still a colony of Portugal. Among other factors, there is the population and economic issue, as there were a large number of indigenous people and their enslavement was cheaper, since an African in a situation of slavery was two or three times more expensive than an indigenous person. Those who had greater knowledge of the territory managed to escape and were unlikely to be recaptured. The colonizers then created missions <sup>5</sup>in the interior, began the process of catechizing the groups and exploited <sup>6</sup>the labor of this population in farming. With

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<sup>5</sup>It is important to highlight that in the colonial period, in Brazil, the church's action in the colonization process took place in different ways, that is, it was not homogeneous, depending on the historical moment of relations between State and church (Silva; Amorim, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Since the first decades of the 17th century, when the discovery of the other in the region of Minas Gerais, the bandeirantes were responsible for supplying important parts of the country with enslaved Indians. São Paulo's bandeirantes entered the forested mountains, backlands and caatingas of Minas Gerais in search of indigenous prey destined for enslavement (Schwarcz; Gomes, 2018).

these objectives, entire indigenous populations were then attracted to religious villages (Schwarcz; Gomes, 2018).

Schwarcz and Gomes (2018, p. 278, our translation) highlight, “‘Indian mocambos’ and even those with indigenous people and Africans together” began to form, all fugitives from slavery<sup>7</sup>. There is, therefore, a historical debt of the Brazilian State with peoples of African origin and with peoples originating from this territory. Added to this, the “current rates of inequality, discrimination and exclusion make clear the continuous and stubborn invisibility of these generations” (Schwarcz; Gomes, 2018, p. 16, our translation).

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and in accordance with the philosophical-scientific debates of the time, which were guided by racist ideas, Brazil's modernization project was not interested in integrating the population of African and indigenous, as it associated miscegenation with backwardness, a thought that boosted the ideals of whitening the Brazilian population, supported by eugenic theories, very present in the attempt to build national identity. The consequence of this was that the absence of public policies for the integration of the recently freed black population and the terrible survival conditions generated dramatic consequences that were reproduced over time.

With regard to the indigenous population, the Brazilian State used a variety of strategies to integrate them into society, but not as a practice of alterity, as this population has always been seen as an obstacle to development. Under the argument of “economic development” and “progress”, indigenous peoples now needed to be emancipated so that the Brazilian State could exempt itself from the duty to protect them and their ancestral territories. With these clear intentions, there were attempts to “nationalize” the indigenous population so that the nation would be homogeneous, unique and indivisible, thus erasing differences. And so indigenous peoples began to be written on the margins of our history, becoming victims of a merciless process of invisibility and capitalist exploitation.

For all this, we say that Brazil is considered the largest slave territory in the Western Hemisphere (Gomes, 2019), given that this country was the last to extinguish the slave trade <sup>8</sup>, with the Eusébio de Queirós Law, in 1850; and also, the last to “abolish” slavery, which occurred with the Áurea Law, in 1888. The result was the development of an unequal and

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<sup>7</sup>It is worth noting that black and indigenous slavery has historical specificities and should not be understood as a single process.

<sup>8</sup>Gomes (2019) reports that Brazil alone received almost 5 million captive Africans, 40% of the total shipped to America.



extremely racist society <sup>9</sup>(Almeida, 2021), although the majority of the Brazilian population is not white, which can be justified by the informal mechanisms of discrimination that filter the access of the population of African and indigenous origin to goods, opportunities, qualifications and participation in decision-making spheres.

With regard to the provision of school education to indigenous peoples, from the 16th century until the middle of the 20th century, this education took place through programs and was always based on catechization and forced integration into non-indigenous society (Ferreira, 2001). Such guidelines followed the principles contained in legislation, as it was the Union's duty to assimilate and incorporate indigenous people into the national community. In this way, education became an instrument of repression, imposition of values and denial of differences. However, important changes were achieved when, in the mid- 1970s, the indigenous movement began to strengthen and began the process of breaking the domination that had been imposed on it for several centuries. They then began to organize themselves to confront the Brazilian State's way of acting (Ferreira, 2001).

With regard to the development of higher education policies for indigenous peoples in Brazil, it is worth noting that, according to Paladino (2013), at the end of 1990, the Brazilian government did not consider higher education for indigenous peoples a priority. It was the perception that Higher Education could also become an instrument of political struggle, to guarantee rights, and the urgency of indigenous professionals with training in scientific knowledge, in order to articulate it with their ancestral knowledge, that made for indigenous peoples to demand admission to Universities (Barroso-Hoffman, 2005).

Lázaro and Montechiare (2016, p. 7, our translation), on the issue of indigenous peoples' access to Higher Education, highlight that

Access by indigenous peoples to higher education is a matter of historical justice. These people could reject the learning models used by the surrounding culture of indigenous societies. However, aware that this is a struggle, most indigenous peoples recognize that it is necessary to minimally master the knowledge strategy of the “whites” to establish relationships closer to the ideal of respect by which they are guided.

However, more effective actions that facilitated the entry of indigenous students into Higher Education began to be instituted in the 1990s, which took place through agreements between the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI) and some private and

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<sup>9</sup>Almeida (2021, p. 50) highlights that “Individual behaviors and institutional processes are derived from a society whose racism is the rule, not the exception”.

community institutions. But it had a greater impact through actions that took place in two segments, specific courses, such as the Diversity at the University Program (Diversity) and the Indigenous Intercultural Degree Program (Prolind), created by the Ministry of Education (MEC); and through the offer of special or supplementary places in regular courses (Bergamaschi; Brito; Doebber, 2018). In relation to the FUNAI initiative, agreements were signed with certain public and private institutions so that the entry of indigenous students into Higher Education could take place. Regarding this issue, Lima (2014, p. 16, our translation) highlights that:

In most of the known cases, these are individuals who managed to obtain financial support from the National Indian Foundation (Funai) to study in private institutions [...] In addition to all the criticism that can be made of this first “policy of grants” from Funai – implemented in a non-transparent way, as *ad hoc*, individualized solutions unaccompanied by clear global purposes and well -defined values –, it is important to note that it remained in force, although substantively transformed.

In this sense, the Diversity program was planned in 2002, after the Durban conference, when the issue of ethnic-racial equality was discussed, with the participation of the black and indigenous movements. After this program ended in 2007, the objective was to produce subsidies based on experiences for the construction of government public policies in order to “meet the demands of access, permanence and success in basic and higher education of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations and segments of national society” (Barnes, 2010, p. 69, our translation), which found themselves in unfavorable conditions regarding access to Higher Education. Prolind, of hybrid origin, was derived from the Diversity program and involves political articulations and discussions within the scope of the Secretariat of Higher Education (SESu), with the participation of the Secretariat of Distance Education, Literacy and Diversity (Secad) (Barnes, 2010, p. 63).

We highlight that Prolind helped to meet, albeit partially, the need for differentiated training for indigenous teachers, whose creation process involved the action of several actors during the early 2000s. Since 2004, this program has been considered an important gateway for private Higher Education institutions. It, however, does not constitute a permanent support policy, as the release of financial flows is conditioned on the creation of notices that select projects from interested public universities.

According to Barnes (2010), according to some data from Prolind, more than 2.7 thousand indigenous students have already benefited directly and, in indirect terms, estimated



to have served a population of more than 100 thousand indigenous people. However, the author highlights, these programs are much more characterized as projects, since they have a finite execution period and their financial resources have a limited execution time. He also notes that there is great expectation for these projects to become public policies and have long-term budgets.

Regarding the offer of special or supplementary places in regular courses, before the Quota Law, Federal Law No. 12,711/2012, around 50 Higher Education institutions developed admission policies for indigenous students through intercultural degrees, or through reserved or supplementary places. These were policies that guaranteed, at least in part, the effective entry of indigenous students into Brazilian Universities until the promulgation of this Law (Bergamaschi; Brito; Doebber, 2018).

As for the format of this policy, it allows specific vacancies for indigenous students in two ways: there is a percentage reserved in existing vacancies; or additional vacancies are created. The forms of entry are those that take advantage of the already existing selection process: such as the universal entrance exam; or a specific selection process is created, with differentiated tests.

These are affirmative actions <sup>10</sup>that function as

[...] reparatory/compensatory and/or preventive action, which seeks to correct a situation of discrimination and inequality inflicted on certain groups in the past, present or future, through the social, economic, political and/or cultural valorization of these groups, during a limited period. The emphasis on one or more of these aspects will depend on the targeted group and the historical-social context (Moehlecke, 2002, p. 203, our translation).

In Brazil, affirmative action policies for indigenous peoples in Higher Education were initially implemented through the promulgation of state laws and on the initiative of the Universities themselves. In 2012, these measures were supported by the Quota Law, Law No. 12,711/2012, when 50% of places at federal higher education institutions were reserved for students from public secondary education. Thus, part of the vacancies are now allocated to self-declared black, brown and indigenous candidates, according to the proportion of this population in the states <sup>11</sup>where the institutions are located (Brazil, 2012).

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<sup>10</sup>In order to ignore such policies, there is a segment of society that sees the adoption of affirmative actions as an unconstitutional policy, since it can be understood as a guarantee of privilege.

<sup>11</sup>In IBGE data (Brazil, 2012), self-declared indigenous people make up 0.4% of the Brazilian population, totaling around 519 thousand individuals. According to the census, indigenous populations can be found

It cannot be denied that these rights were won through many confrontations, since the political struggles of the black movement and indigenous peoples were essential for the construction of <sup>12</sup>resistance actions in favor of democracy and social inclusion of the population of African and indigenous origin. in Brazil. These are legal provisions that mark and help consolidate the struggle of this population; but authors like Amaral (2010) and Beltrão (2007), among others, warn that affirmative actions aimed at admission to Higher Education institutions in Brazil alone do not guarantee the professional training of indigenous students and their inclusion. In this sense, Beltrão (2007) argues that these institutions must develop policies and practices aimed at the demands of indigenous students, as entry into Higher Education is still not a guarantee of training and professional performance in the area.

According to Ferreira (2013), experiences with affirmative action in Brazil are still recent, and it is difficult to predict the consequences of this type of practice, such as quotas for entry into Higher Education institutions. Even in the midst of so many discussions and controversies, the IBGE (Brazil, 2016) showed the importance of these legal instruments, given the increased participation of self-declared black and brown students and low-income students in Higher Education. From 2005 to 2015, for example, there was a 7.3% increase in the number of black and mixed-race students in Higher Education. In 2005 they totaled 5.5% and, in 2015, they reached 12.8%.

With this, we can say that the participation of students who entered through quotas (income; black, brown and indigenous; and people with disabilities) has been growing <sup>13</sup>since the implementation of affirmative policies in 2005. Ten years later, this index reached 42, 5% and, from 2016 to 2018, remains between 48% and 49%. Even so, they still continued to represent less than half of young white people in the same age group. Regarding indigenous students, according to the 2016 Higher Education Census, <sup>14</sup>they form the group with the lowest percentage of attendance in the three main public policies for access to Higher Education.

The data shows that 63% of indigenous people who were enrolled in 2016 did not get a place in the public network, were not selected for contracts from the Student Financing

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throughout the Brazilian territory, although more than half are concentrated in the North and Central-West Amazon region.

<sup>12</sup>From 2008 onwards, federal Universities began to implement the National Student Assistance Plan (Pnaes) through the transfer of resources from the Union to the Universities. This plan, although it does not make direct references to assistance for indigenous students, has been an important strategy for keeping these students in institutions. (Bergamschi; Brito; Doebber, 2018).

<sup>13</sup>Check out <https://www.andifes.org.br/?p=79626>. Accessed on: 10 July 2023.

<sup>14</sup>Check out <https://g1.globo.com/educacao/noticia/estudantes-indigenas.ghtml>. Accessed on: 10 July 2023.

Fund (Fies) or to obtain scholarships from the University for All Program (Prouni) to pay for private college. Of the more than 49 thousand indigenous people in Higher Education, 12,348 are in the public network (25%) and 36,678 are in private universities (75%). Until 2019, the percentage of indigenous people in Universities had been growing.

However, data from the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) show that there was an interruption in this growth, as in 2018 there were 57,706 indigenous people enrolled, and in 2020 this enrollment fell to 47,267. This decrease could be greater, as everything indicates that dropout rates have increased in the context of the pandemic and this new reality has also affected the indigenous population in accessing *online* classes.

An important issue that deserves attention is that the text of the Quota Law provides that, after ten years, the Federal Legislature must meet to debate the convenience or otherwise of this Law for inclusion in Higher Education. Based on this prerogative, there are a series of defense initiatives and attempts to repeal this Law, which is done through Bills that wish to interrupt it or extend it for another ten years, or more. We can say, therefore, that the defense of this policy needs to be firm and continuous, as there are greater forces that continue to reinforce exclusion and threaten the guarantee of rights.

Furthermore, in this scenario, public universities, which are experiencing a neoliberal offensive, have tried to resist the forces of commodification of social policies. When these institutions do not give in to this logic, they begin to face a series of difficulties in guaranteeing the effective access and permanence of the black and indigenous population in their socialization spaces.

### **Inside the University: indigenous students in Higher Education and the challenge of intercultural and interepistemic dialogues**

In recent years, Brazilian public universities have experienced a drastic reduction in budgets allocated to science and technology. According to the report <sup>15</sup>by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there was a dramatic reduction in investments of 84% from 2012 to 2021, in addition to the wave of science denialism and

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<sup>15</sup>CHNEEGANS, S.; LEWIS, J.; STRAZA, T. (org.). **UNESCO Science Report** : The race against time for smarter development – Executive summary. Paris: UNESCO Publishing , 2021. Available at: [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377250\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377250_eng). Accessed on: 10 July 2023.

the spread of misinformation. These are political actions that as a whole demonstrate the abandonment of the State's commitment to education at all levels.

Also notorious are the movements that move towards the privatization of <sup>16</sup> federal universities, the absolute rupture with the autonomy of these institutions, and the denial of higher education to the poorest layers of the Brazilian population. When guided by the neoliberal logic, many higher education institutions have assumed a character of legitimation of hierarchies, constructing borders, including epistemic ones, that do not allow dialogue with marginalized populations, whose experiences and knowledge have also been denied, excluded and subjugated.

Such practices are naturalized and have helped to strengthen the hegemonic force of neoliberal thought in this country. In this direction, work will be centered on the hegemony of an epistemology (Santos, 2005), following a model that has a specific correspondence with the market principle, and that does not dialogue with oppressed populations, taking into account the social problems experienced.

Regarding this issue, Frigotto (1995) highlights that the reality of teaching in Brazil, both in basic education and in Higher Education, still presents a very fragmented and disjointed organization from social reality. The curricula are compartmentalized and sealed and have little dialogue with the knowledge developed in other subjects. In this logic, an uncritical human and professional training is produced, insufficient to transform the reality in which one is inserted. For the author, the fragmented and disjointed curricular organization will reflect the historical disruption of human activities established by the industrial model for populations, focused on new work relationships.

In this sense, Oliveira (2016) highlights that modern science is Eurocentric, and this “ended up supporting the process of colonization and enslavement of non-European peoples, as they are seen as inferior, rude and barbaric” (Oliveira, 2016, p. 88, our translation). We can say, then, that the social and scientific reality of modernity is marked by social injustices, making the subject increasingly dehumanized. However, due to the demands of this new scenario, it is necessary to rethink human beings with broader and more critical training, which will require, in addition to changes in the forms of labor exploitation, overcoming their

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<sup>16</sup> As an example, we cite the Proposed Amendment to the Constitution (PEC) No. 206/2019, which was once again debated in the Chamber of Deputies. The bill proposes the collection of tuition fees to students in public universities, changing the text of Article 206 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees free public education in official establishments.

own exploitation. But, to do so, it is also necessary to problematize the theoretical constructs that support the logic of the dominant pattern of power and knowledge production.

In the work “A discourse on the sciences”, Santos explains that the dominant model of science is that of scientific rationality, which denies other forms of knowledge production that do not follow established epistemological and methodological principles (Santos, 2005). In this way of thinking, there is little room for changes in the world, as what prevails is a certain predictability in life's events. With this, we are then challenged by a model of scientific rationality that imposes on us the challenge of seeing the world from its own perspective, that is, from its own theoretical constructs.

It is important to note that there are different perspectives through which we can think about epistemology as a study or theory of knowledge. However, our approach follows the perspective that considers epistemology “any notion or idea, reflected or not, about the conditions of what counts as valid knowledge” (Santos; Menezes, 2010, p. 15, our translation). As a way of guiding this discussion from a counter-hegemonic perspective, Oliveira (2016) brings some ideas present in postmodernity that predominate in the 20th century. This is what she calls “emerging scientific rationality”, which breaks with positivist and Cartesian paradigms. In this logic, the author highlights the concept of “ecology of knowledge” (Santos, 2010) as a way of “overcoming polarization between knowledge and the fragmentation of the school curriculum, valuing the daily construction of knowledge” (Oliveira, 2016, p. 121).

A good example of the presence of a Eurocentric episteme is evidenced by Câncio (2023) in the study that analyzes the dissident practices and social tensions of indigenous students at a public university located in the Brazilian Amazon. The author notes that

[...] the data from the questions regarding dissident practices and social conditions at the University that hinder the affirmation of knowledge and indigenous identity, highlight the need to affirm indigenous identity and culture in the face of the destabilizing forces caused by the curriculum (Câncio, 2023, p. 8, our translation).

For the author, even though the institution made it possible to enter the public University, “The tension produced by the embargo on indigenous knowledge is recurrent in the speeches of indigenous students”. And such practices “are seen by them as mechanisms for strengthening invisibility, accentuated by the detachment of students from their epistemic, ethical and racial location” (Câncio, 2023, p. 14, our translation).

From the perspective of the need for dialogue between knowledge, interculturality marks the (re)construction of critical-other thinking, critical thinking that moves away from ideas based on the Eurocentric legacy, “thus giving a return to the dominant geopolitics of knowledge that has had its global north center” (Walsh, 2005, p. 25, our translation). The term inter /multicultural education is used to indicate a set of educational proposals that aim to promote relationships and respect between sociocultural groups, through democratic and dialogical processes (Fleuri, 2003).

More specifically, Catherine Walsh (2001, p. 10-11, our translation) explains that interculturality is:

- A dynamic and permanent process of relationship, communication and learning between two cultures under conditions of respect, mutual legitimacy, symmetry and equality.
- An exchange that is built between culturally different people, knowledge and practices, seeking to develop a new meaning between them in their difference.
- A space for negotiation and translation where social, economic and political inequalities, and power relations and conflicts in society are not kept hidden but rather recognized and confronted.
- A social and political task that challenges society as a whole, which starts from concrete and conscious social practices and actions and tries to create modes of responsibility and solidarity.
- A goal to achieve.

With regard to Higher Education and indigenous peoples in Brazil, interculturality is still a goal to be achieved, as this perspective is challenged by the condition of subalternity experienced by indigenous people both outside, in other social spaces, and within this “new” space, which is the academic environment. The condition of silence by the institutions themselves about their Euro-centric curricula is a form of denial that these are constituted based on power relations and ideologies that help to naturalize the invisibility of others, including issues that violate their own rights.

Ballestrin (2013) notes that epistemic colonial difference is also complicit with universalism, sexism, and racism. And this requires us, who are in a place of invisibility in the production of knowledge, to question and think about alternatives for the decolonization of knowledge produced in the field of Education, especially in studies with indigenous peoples. In this sense, some studies that investigated indigenous students in Higher Education contribute to highlighting the most recurrent problems, amid power relations, faced by these students in the academic environment.



The search carried out on the CAPES portal for works produced in the period from 2014 to 2023, whose data are discussed in this text, showed that there is a significant production of works in Brazil that address indigenous students in Higher Education. When we relate, however, to the descriptors *Higher Education*, *Indigenous People* and *Interculturality*, with quotation marks, 5,771 works were found, including dissertations and theses. Of these, we selected 23 works that were closest to the object in question: 13 dissertations and 10 theses. Most of the works were produced in the South Region (11), followed by the North Region (05), Southeast Region (03), Central-West Region (03), and Federal District (01). In this text, we discuss the works that most contributed to the debate on the issue addressed.

Calderoni (2015), in the study whose title is “Indigenous teachers and higher education: translations and negotiations at the Ñandejara indigenous school in the Te'ýikue village, Caarapó/MS”, doctoral thesis produced at the Dom Bosco Catholic University (UCDB), aimed to investigate the processes of translation and/ or negotiation between traditional knowledge and Western knowledge produced by Guarani and Kaiowá teachers, trained at Higher Education, considering the indigenous school from a differentiated and intercultural perspective. The author points out that, at times, pedagogical practices are regulated by school system regulations; but, in others, the Guarani and Kaiowá practice traces “other” epistemological parameters, guided by Ñembo' and his own *Katu* pedagogy, making translation and negotiation between knowledge happen.

Borniotto (2017), in the study called “ Inclusion policies and higher education for indigenous students in Paraná: experiences at the State University of Maringá”, This doctoral thesis produced at the State University of Maringá (UEM), sought to understand how indigenous students from the Kaingang, Guarani and Xetá ethnic groups access, study and stay at UEM. The author verified the struggles to be a university student and remain indigenous, strengthening their identity, and analyzed the issue of exclusion and prejudice in academia, a Western institution that has little experience with the presence of indigenous cultures and languages. The data show that stereotypical images of indigenous students are still maintained at the University, and indicate that it is necessary to put into practice teaching strategies that promote the inclusion of indigenous people in Higher Education, in order to contribute to the reduction of social and economic inequalities experienced in higher education.

In turn, Brito (2016), in the work entitled “ Indigenous-woman-mother-university or being a student at UFRGS”, master's dissertation produced at the Federal University of Rio

Grande do Sul (UFRGS), it aimed to understand the presence of indigenous women, belonging to the Kaingang and Guarani peoples, who from 2008 were approved in a specific and differentiated selection process at UFRS. The author found that the presence of these women in Higher Education has been growing, and this can be seen in enrollment, which increased by another 50%. It is noted that indigenous women, unlike non-indigenous women, are the ones who most seek out the University, and to ignore the signs that the affirmative action policy for indigenous people at UFRGS is a success is to fail to recognize the struggles of these people.

Doebber (2017), in the work called “Indigenous students in UFRGS graduations: movements of re-existence”, a doctoral thesis produced at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRS), sought to understand the indigenous being at university and how the institution comes mobilizing in the face of such a presence. The author highlights that indigenous university students are faced with the logic of being in this space through a relationship of proximity and distance, which occurs on the border between two opposite and complementary universes: the academic universe and traditional life. In this relationship, they appropriate the academic universe and Western knowledge, but they also present resistance, which occurs through language, different temporalities and communal logic, movements that contribute to possible ruptures in the hegemonic episteme.

Pereira (2018), in the work called “Indigenous people and Higher Education in the Amazon: reality and perspectives of the affirmative action policy of the Federal University of Western Pará (2010–2015)”, master's thesis produced at the Federal University of Western Pará (UFOPA), analyzed the Special Selection Process (PSE) as an affirmative action policy for indigenous people to access UFOPA, from 2010 to 2015, and its impact on quality higher education for these people. The author points out the demands of indigenous students to a different pedagogical and curricular proposal for them at the institution. Even though the main focus of the work is not this, the need for intercultural and interepistemic dialogue is evident, which is expressed in the need for methodologies that dialogue with the realities of these peoples and that meet their specificities. It also highlights that, despite the difficulties, the UFOPA PSE has provided opportunities for these students to enroll significantly in Higher Education, showing the importance of this University in the inclusion of indigenous people and traditional populations in the lower Amazon.

Santos (2018), in the work called “From the village to the university - indigenous students in the dialogue between traditional and scientific knowledge at UFT”, a doctoral

thesis produced at the University of Brasília (UNB), sought to understand the nature of the dialogue between academic knowledge, produced at the University, and knowledge traditions of indigenous students. Among the important issues discussed, such as quotas for indigenous people, which are not sufficient at the institution, with the need for permanence policies, the author found that there is no articulation between traditional indigenous knowledge and that of the university. The result of this is that indigenous students are unable to integrate with current academic rules, which also results from the unpreparedness of teachers, prejudices, stigmas and social exclusion experienced in the institution.

In general, we can say that in the studies highlighted, the issue of Euro-centric curricula and the condition of silence of the institutions themselves in the interrelationship with indigenous students at the University appear as tangential issues. However, it is possible to verify that the work is already moving towards an epistemological paradigm contrary to the hegemonic disciplinary matrices that insist on the erasure of knowledge production practices that are not associated with this model, and that distance themselves from the reality of discourses and real social struggles of social actors. Even though interculturality appears as a category little explored in this relationship, with greater emphasis on functional interculturality, it has been presented as a non-hierarchical pedagogical proposal that seeks to develop relationships of cooperation, respect and acceptance of the difference between different cultures and subjects.

For Fleuri (2003), interculturality starts from the recognition of the existence of subjects with different cultures and who are willing to dialogue. However, for there to be dialogue, it is necessary that social actors are in conditions of dialogue, so that historically denied experiences can emerge, gaining materiality and visibility. Thus, in Higher Education, interculturality should, in fact, promote dialogue between different social and cultural groups with a view to facing conflicts caused by the asymmetry of power between them in institutions. This perspective, therefore, suggests that different people meet in the same world and coexist in relationships of negotiation, conflicts and reciprocal loans (Canclini, 2006).

Still regarding the relationships between Western knowledge and traditional indigenous knowledge, Bergamaschi (2014, p. 12) observes that indigenous movements and academia have increasingly used the term indigenous intellectual. But, for her, this denomination is external to indigenous peoples and also expresses a Western understanding of knowledge, “including hierarchizing who produces. Like this,

In the argument I present here, this understanding makes a difference, because, when thinking about indigenous intellectuals, we can keep in mind: the understanding of orality intellectuals, constituted according to their knowledge systems; intellectuals woven not only in the processes of interculturality, but also in the processes of interscientificity, when graduating from school, academia, when carrying out research as masters, doctors or academic researchers, bringing different sciences into dialogue (Bergamaschi, 2014, p. 16, our translation).

In this sense, affirmative actions are very important, as they also allow this reality to be problematized in many aspects, which was previously almost impossible, given the absence of these groups in Higher Education. Therefore, we can say that questioning absence at the University is as important as questioning intellectual assimilation, pedagogical practices regulated by dominant scientific rationality, since knowledge has always been used as an important instrument of hierarchical classification and reinforcement of patterns of power and hegemonic knowledge.

### **Final remarks**

When we reflect on the entry of indigenous students into Higher Education, bearing in mind the challenge of intercultural and interepistemic dialogues, we can say that the place that indigenous students still occupy in Brazilian Universities is almost that of absolute absence and denial, even though we have already made important progress in the struggles to guarantee this right, including with the creation of specific programs within some Universities. It is evident that this discussion of admission requires us to be concerned with permanence and successful completion, issues that require further discussion and debate, given that Higher Education institutions tend to be guided by colonial patterns of power, manifested in the processes of imposed anti-dialogical subjectivation.

The works researched on this topic highlight the processes of negotiation between traditional indigenous and Western knowledge in Higher Education and point to the perspective of a differentiated and intercultural education. However, it is clear that pedagogical practices are still regulated by hegemonic disciplinary matrices, which has placed indigenous students in situations of conflict, as it helps to reinforce exclusion and prejudice in the academic space. The university community still maintains stereotypical images of indigenous students, and this requires that teaching strategies that address this issue be put into practice, necessary for the inclusion of indigenous peoples in Higher Education with due respect.

The presence of indigenous peoples in universities therefore requires a pedagogical proposal that seeks to develop relationships of cooperation, respect and acceptance of the difference between different cultures and subjects. And this requires that we also fight to overcome the place of invisibility in the production of knowledge, questioning the hierarchical relationships between them, what is imposed and naturalized, and think about alternatives for the decolonization of knowledge produced in the field of Education, especially in studies with indigenous peoples.

Possible ways to help society overcome inequalities, especially racial inequality, can be presented within universities themselves. But, for this, we need, in fact, to rethink the dissemination and affirmation of Eurocentric and neoliberal values, knowledge and ideologies, which, in many aspects, can contribute to the disqualification of other epistemic subjects. Curricula need to be discussed from the perspective of inclusion, of resistance against hegemony, especially against the political-scientific discourse that tends to distort ancestry, confuse history, identity processes, and prevents the socialization and dissemination of different ways of thinking the world.

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