

# Traditional Mapuche education

## Contribution for an Intercultural Education (1)

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### Abstract

The intercultural education is presented as an initiative of our society to incorporate ethnic groups in the vision of the world, which is constructed through education. Unfortunately, the main contribution that the ancestral cultures make to the curriculum is based on some idiomatic aspects and cultural manifestations (rites and ceremonies). According to our point of view, this vision is rather restricted, because it ignores or does not know the ways of traditional education of ethnic groups. This essay shows, in a summarized way, the experience of the Mapuche people in their way of developing the teaching-learning process, which is explicitly based on the communication form that was established among the family members. It is necessary to emphasize that three methods were used, and they were based on oral communication (pentukum, nüttram and gülam), these not only allowed the internalization of the contents, but also their evaluation. Another important element is constituted by three central subject areas of the Mapuche education: social, nature and divinity relationship and how each one of them become, in practice, communication forms with superior entities. In this way, it is constituted the general training system and education in Mapuche culture, which is able to evaluate coherent subjects and content connection, to constitute a real contribution to formal education of any country or culture, which must be understood as the modification of primary education's curriculum.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, Mapuche culture, Education

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### 1. - INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the role of the family in present education, we usually talk about "support" (secondary in most of the cases) that parents give to the "school" as an institution, which was made and officialized to develop the learning – socialization process, culturally accepted, this would allow people to develop themselves in a society, within a references framework made a priori by itself. This secondary support is centered in actions handled by the school, in which parents complement the curriculum plans through homework or obligations that they carry out with their children, mainly at home. Neither the evolution of society, or the reforms in the educational system that had been initiated in most of the western countries have allowed the participation of parents in the formal educational systems to become an effective support, so they never could substitute the role of the Government or the school in this process, resigning parents to a passive and receptive action of the established educational model.

If the presence of the family has been limited in the educational process of western children, in native societies that co-habit in global societies the situation has shown not just the absence of the family, but their cultural manifestations and values breaking, because they see themselves subordinated by the "rules" of dominant society. According to Bourdieu's approach (1995) the education administrated by the Government limits equal access to education, due to the fact that native people are placed in the weakest social economic stratum. This situation limits them to public education guided by the Government, meanwhile the dominant stratum can access to a more exclusive education, which is provided by the private system. All this allows to institutionalize through education, the economic differences, stratum, working activity in which are included the social class and dominant culture of the directional spaces as much in the work, police and political system, since educated and instructed natives will be hardly able to hold important positions. In this context, and through an investigation developed under the assistance of the Universidad de La Frontera de Temuco - Chile, the necessity arises to re-observe and re-codify the forms and contents that ancestral and traditionally Mapuche families have used to develop the formation

process of their children, and then, it could be a contribution to generate an effective system of intercultural education, that not only allows to incorporate contents related to history and language of the original people, but also methodologies and main subjects about values formation of the person that point fundamentally to the study of the communication that is developed inside the families, and for the Mapuche family with their immediate surroundings (society, divinity and nature)

## 2. - THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION OF THE MAPUCHE PEOPLE

Before the Spaniards arrival in America, Mapuche territory was extended from The Aconcagua River in the north and the Chiloe's islands in the South. One hundred years before the Europeans arrived to the present Central America, the Inca Empire, located in the present Peru, initiated a process of territorial expansion, which reached until the Maule river in the south of present Chile, not crossing over this river product of the Mapuche resistance of those times. With the start of the Castilian conquest of Chile in 1541, the relations established with Mapuche society of those years were violent – like in the rest of the Americas – occupying territory until the Bio-Bio River and the present Corral bay and the Chiloe's Islands. Later on, the state already constituted, would initiate the pacification process of the region occupied by the Mapuche – the current Araucanía, subduing it and systematically reducing their lands until today. The present relationship between the Mapuche people and Chilean society is characterized by a total submission, from basic aspects like the recognition of their people as unique and different from the Chilean one, until deep cultural elements, which are rooted such as the education or religion. As far as education is concerned, these people are in conditions to make real contributions to the formation process for the children of our country.

Traditional Mapuche education was rooted in the family daily routine. The concepts of building knowledge or "to learn by doing" took form in labor, social, cultural and productive actions that Mapuche people developed, in which the teaching – learning process involved different family members, where the main methodological aspect was centered in communication. Although, it is true, that this process was centered in daily routine and in oral communication, where methodology and basic contents were not exempt. The Mapuche family had basic teaching and evaluation patterns, which acquired certain levels according to the characteristics and special needs of each family or community group, depending on their social, cultural or productive level. Therefore, the family played an active role in the education of the children. This role was shown in the responsibility assigned to the family in the education process; but not only with children of the closer family group, but it was also extended to all children of the community. Consequently, the responsibility in the education-learning process went beyond their own children, having to act (every family) co-supportively in the formation process of their relatives and community neighbors. The way in which they act is directly related to the contents and strategies used. Once again, communication is the essential tool in the formative process and as the educational level becomes more complex other family groups are incorporated as part of this communication with sense and education.

## 3. - CONTENTS AND STRATEGIES USED BY MAPUCHE IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

**3.1. - Thematic Contents:** In the scope of the contents present in the Mapuche education, the main thematic axes are divided in three main meta-categories: a) social relationship b) nature relationship and c) divinity relationship. These three categories of contents included the totality of the aspects considered relevant in the formation of a Mapuche and each one of them establishes communication as its central axis.

**a) Social Relationship.** The young Mapuche learned day by day, respect was considered as a supreme value in the relations that he would have to exert inside of his society. Noggler, (1972), talks about stories of the first missionaries, who left some records and letters, reported since 1540-1569, they say that: ".they teach children from a young age, a social behaviour, they learn to share small gifts, to help their parents and younger siblings, they learn to greet visitors by shaking hands with them and to be quiet when adults are talking.". The values of communication with respect are accentuated, when they are in relation with the elders of the people. Old age or elder condition inside the Mapuche culture means a superior status; this is because of the accumulated experience of life and wisdom. Some Mapuche people

say that the search for wisdom in the Mapuche culture is focused on the oldest ones, and according to Mr. Domingo Curillan<sup>1</sup> words, "*It would be very shameful to get old and not be able to give wisdom*". Another important element in social relations is to keep traditions, mainly language and its use. Since children are young, they are taught by their parents for a good use of language, and in communication as the main characteristic of social relations with other Mapuche people, as well as with the community and/or other groups or families.

**b) Relationship with Nature.** This constitutes, without a doubt, the main thematic category of education for Mapuche people. Every society has a relation with nature, since this concept is related to the habitat. The fundamental difference is in the concepts of *relation* versus *coexistence*. The human actions named in the concept of relation with nature do not take entailed values, such as the respect or reciprocity; they only establish a life style, where two units (human society and nature, in this case) keep a unidirectional relation of domination by human society. On the other hand, Mapuche people has developed a coexistence with nature based on statements of reciprocity and communication, which establish a relation of equality between these two units, there is no domination or unidirectional use, the patterns of operation or capitalization of natural resources do not exist for Mapuche people. Communication and reciprocity are the main characteristic of the relation that takes place between the Mapuche people with nature; for that reason the nature behaves like a generous mother, who worries to give the necessary elements for the life of the human beings.

**c) Relationship with Divinity.** The relationship with divinity founds the coexistence and the communication of Mapuche people with each one of the forces that govern their life; it is in this way that divinity is not separated from their daily life and the forces that govern it. The presence of divinity in the religions of the ethnic groups of this continent is focused on nature. The religious experience of Mapuche people is related to their total functions as a country; it means that it would be very difficult to separate it from the other values; therefore, their manifestations are interdependent. The definition of religion that Melville J, Herskovits, proposed (1968, 23) conceptualize it like a process of "identification with a force or superior power" As well as, in absolute agreement Mrs. Celinda Curiqueo<sup>2</sup> says: "*when you step on unknown land, say it hello and ask it permission to cross it and you must always ask the spirits of the nature for their protection for you and for your family*". Religions are part of their daily living and therefore coexist with vital functions such as: health and disease like, in this case, where the Machi arises, as the character able to join both concepts and turn them into one in Mapuche life. Once again Mrs. Celinda illustrates us through the following sentence: "*Machis*" are the doctor that neutralizes the negative forces and helps good spirits, in order to the man keeps the right balance, which is materialized in good health.

### 3.2. - Forms of Education.

The education and formation process of the Mapuche children was developed through three main forms (or methodologies) in education: a) pentukum b) Nüttram and c) Gülam. In each one of these educational strategies were required the participation of all the families and community members. They constituted learning strategies based on oral and attitudinal communication, which involved all the community members.

**a) Pentukum or protocol Mapuche greeting;** The Pentukün was a method used for the intellectual development of children and young Mapuche people. This included the development of memory, speech skills and communication in general, and then qualities such as prudence, empathy, solidarity and respect among others. The process began since the first childhood and it consisted of visiting close relatives such as uncles and aunts, who lived near from their family. They were sent as "Werken" (Mapuche word that means messenger), with a very special vision, children had to achieve this task exactly as it was requested by their mother or father or any other relative, who would be in charge of their education at that moment. Children had to visit their relatives and say hello to them as they were requested, developing a great greeting speech in which they ask not only the relative, but also the rest of the family about their health, sometimes including their neighbors too, when they were already able to memorize more elements of the greeting.

**b) Nüttram or Conversations.** Conversation has been the most frequent method, used by Mapuche people in the education of their children and young people in their formation as person; being able to live in

harmony with the natural, social and divine environment. The oral communication among their members is so important for Mapuche people, for their history and cultural keeping have been historically based on this legacy. For Mapuche people, the conversation was an important part of oral communication among people and children, they had to understand the importance of the conversation, talking, dialoguing, not only listening, they had to ask too, exposing their doubts or situations, which were in relation to the topic that they were talking about. Learning was developed by parents or another relative or members of the community. This kind of relationship generated an environment of trust, which was constructed day by day. Children, since their first childhood get used to have conversations with their parents, this fact allowed that there were no generational differences; and if this happened, the way was opened to expose the matter in the next conversations, since this kind of conversations was very usual. In this way, parents also could listen to their children, since it was very important, that the own children were constructing their knowledge, and on the other hand, it was very important to parents to know their own children thoughts. Conversations not only allowed an oral interchange, but they also were a kind of affective communication, full of values, parents made efforts in passing on to their children, as well as they lived the same experience with their own parents.

*c) Gülam or advises.* The Mapuche people recognized that the elders of the people are wiser than the youngest ones, because they had more life experience, where they certainly had to participate in several experiences that added to reflections, made them to create their own knowledge and therefore, they were in conditions to orient children's and young's life, to make them know their own experiences, and the teaching left by these experiences to them, and how these elders took advantage of it for their personal lives, such as their personal and collective life history of their family and country. For that reason parents and older relatives had the necessary competences to give suitable education, and in this way be protagonists of the formation as Mapuche person, of their children and other relatives, who were in the formation stage as person. The advise was always a form of education and formation that gave knowledges to the youngest ones, in order to let them incorporate experiences that would allow them to live a better life, in individual and collective form based on experiences of past lives; at the same time those would help to realize, with facility, the difficulties that reality offers in a most harmonious environment with their surroundings.

#### **4.- COMMUNICATION AS A BASE OF CONTENTS AND STRATEGIES.**

As can be observed in the previous section, communication constitutes the foundation, as level of contents such as strategy, in the education of the Mapuche people. It is not a coincidence that these three meta - categories contents, which are part of the speeches of the members of the Mapuche people, have a central concept, that it is called by them "relation"; this relation focuses only from a communicational point of view, it means how Mapuche people communicate with society, divinity and nature, therefore, each one of these elements gives back them through a constant stimuli and contents feed-back to the person. In the idea of communication through these three elements, which compose it (speaker - listener and message), the relation with meta-categories in the flow of these components. Mapuche is not exclusively speaker, but he is also a listener and vice versa. Mapuche society gives constantly "messages", which they codify and transfer or pass on as a teaching content; divinity is communicated every day about daily task and, of course nature does not stop sending "messages" to Mapuche's in relation to Earth and their subsistence, as much cultural and physics.

In a strategies level, communication emerges with a basic condition as culture transmitter. The three educational strategies cited by elders and Mapuche leaders, have as basis the oral communication, without omitting another kind of communication, most corporal and affective kind. The Pentukum is based on the family communication and in keeping of cultural processes focused on Mapuche roots with their family and community. The nüttram summarized the basis of education: conversation. A conversation that reinforces not only the methods and concepts of living, but it also strengthen their identity. Communication in the nüttram is not only verbal, but it is also corporal and affective. Gülam shows the relationship of respect with elders and their role as transmitter of wisdom. Intergenerations communication is not only a sign of admiration and consideration with older people, but it is part of a communication form, that establishes culture and traditions.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

1. We should mention that Mapuche's traditional education has in a level of strategy's contents and in the relation with family in the teaching-learning process, aspects that today we could call progressives, which are found in the basis of the discussions about the modern education. It is, at that moment, that we realize that models of first world cultures do not necessarily have the answers to problems and crisis in the educational structures. Many of the answers, that we are looking for, are in our origins and very close to us. The challenge is to observe, recognize, and use them.
2. Changes in education should be mainly focused on the way of facing the environmental problems, not like an optional or elective subject, but as a transversal concept of the educational curriculum. The practical - theoretical relation or to learn by doing, is another important element in relation to modifications in the style of doing education. It is true; that we have seen important advances in formal education, which have not constituted yet, an expanded methodology in the Chilean schools.
3. Communication as basis of the Mapuche education also establishes methodological categories, which can be modified. If we understand communication in the classroom as that one, where through a transmitter (teacher), we transmit a message (knowledge), which students receive (receiver), we cannot generate changes in the way of teaching. Communication in the classroom should be like the communication in the *ruka*, where the constant unsteadiness of the histories and advices allow the construction of a close, practical and propitious knowledge, which is never dogmatical.

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## Other sources

1 Mr. Domingo Curillan. Old man from Chol Chol, key informant for this researcher La Araucanía region, Chile.

2 Mrs. Celinda Curiqueo. Old lady from Cancura Laja Area, key informant for this research. La Araucanía region, Chile.

## Notes

1. This paper is part of an investigation developed in La Araucanía, IX region – Chile, with Universidad de La Frontera funds. The cites made by Mr. Domingo Curillan and Mrs. Celinda Curiqueo which this article are from persons, which participate in this investigation, specifically old people and traditional Mapuche authorities.

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