

# LEARNING FROM WITHIN: A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN NATIVE SOCIETY<sup>+</sup>

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## Abstract

This article presents a new perspective on how to think about interculturality and education from the perspective of a native society in the Paraguayan Chaco. It highlights how formal schooling reaffirms the model of unidirectional relations advocated by national society. Within this model, indigenous peoples and persons are not allowed to participate in this national society on their own conceptual terms, and inclusion turns out to be mere shorthand for assimilation. This text, on the other hand, proposes modes of education and forms of relating that pay attention to the native dimension. These would contribute to the creation of spaces which indigenous societies as such can hold within national society and support indigenous people's own processes of protagonism and initiative. In parallel, it proposes conceiving of education as *from* rather than *for* autochthonous societies; and conceiving of the learning process from the point of view of *learning* rather than from the point of view of *education*. This conceptual change, which includes a critique of the widespread concept of *interculturality*, entails that we must not design modes of education, but rather

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this text, numbered footnotes are footnotes that appeared in the original text. Footnotes indicated with \* are translator's notes, and footnotes indicated with + are notes suggested by the author of the original text to update the text 10 years after its original composition. At the original author's suggestion, the bibliography of the present translation has been updated in a number of places with bibliographical references to works written between the date of original publication and now, and a number of minor additions were made to the text itself. The author of the original text thanks Jens Van Gysel for taking the initiative to translate this text into English, and for the translation itself. They both thank Nicholas Regan for revising the final version of the translation.

create preconditions for learning from within the native society, which also requires ways of relating from within. In this way, colonialist pressures in education can be overcome and new possibilities for native protagonism can be developed.

**Keywords:** interculturality, native protagonism, social balance, colonization, inclusion, exclusion, interethnic relations, indigenous people, enlhet

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## Introduction

Time and time again, I have the same experience: when I mention to non-indigenous people that we are publishing monolingual texts in an indigenous language (at a book launch, for example), they question why these publications are monolingual. They tend to argue that their contents should be made widely accessible: “What is the use of these texts if they cannot be read?”, they ask.<sup>3</sup> These lines of questioning reflect the idea that only things that are aimed towards – or things that come from – national society are important. In stronger terms, only that which is created for or by national society exists and is meaningful.<sup>4</sup> Here, I am speaking of the practice of *writing*: within this logic, writing is only useful if it is aimed towards, or if it comes from, national society, the non-Indigenous.\*

The above anecdote illustrates a context relevant to the topic of the present text. To clarify the scope of this topic – the meaning and significance of monolingual publications in the Enlhet-Enenlhet languages – I will sketch out some more contexts through additional anecdotes. Let us go to the Chaco region and visit the Enlhet, with more than 8200 members the most populous ethnic group of the Enlhet-Enenlhet nation (Unruh & Kalisch 2003a; Melià 2009: 188; DGECC 2014: 78). Nowadays, the territory of the Enlhet is completely occupied by Mennonite colonies, and the Enlhet themselves live in urban neighborhoods or rural communities under intense political and ideological pressures from these colonies and the institutions that represent them. In parallel, for an outside observer, the Enlhet would seem to have assimilated to a significant extent. They organize their society in accordance with the Mennonite system of churches and agricultural co-operatives, they celebrate their feasts and festivals in church, their villages are made up of straight streets, they cultivate sesame seed, they watch television, and they ride motorbikes. Even more noteworthy is that in any discourse accessible to outsiders, they draw on the non-Indigenous in matters of religion, political organization, economic production, education, health care, and many others. In short, in their discourses and in their superficially observable ways of life, they adhere to models of development that are constantly hawked all over the world. Apart from some folkloric elements, they hide their own traditions, so that towards outsiders, they present themselves as a people without history, without any notable cultural tradition. If they have a face at all, it is a colorless one.

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<sup>3</sup> They ask such questions because of a sentiment of exclusion. This sentiment of exclusion is rooted in a conceptualization of “participation” as being able to consume the Other’s things, rather than participation being the result of a relation built on reciprocal initiative.

<sup>4</sup> The common practice of indifferently qualifying texts in indigenous languages as translations, even when they are original creations, also fits within this logic.

\* Throughout this text, I use the (capitalized) terms *the Indigenous* and *the Non-Indigenous* as translations for the Spanish expressions *lo indígena* and *lo no-indígena*, respectively. For lack of conventional ways of expressing such Spanish nominalized adjectives in English, I capitalize these expressions to clarify that they are technical terms referring to “that which pertains to indigenous society” and “that which pertains to non-indigenous society”, respectively.

Let me sketch out a third context. I am visiting an elderly Enlhet couple in their home – they live with their children and grandchildren. I hear how they speak with tenderness, with joy, with pride, with sadness, and above all with clear insight into a life that now seems part of the past but which in fact describes the origins of the Enlhet and, for that reason, continues to shape a significant part of their personal and social life today. Nevertheless, over the course of eight decades,\* the foundations of this life have been covered by an oblivion brought on by a multitude of pressures. Nowadays, only the oldest members of the Enlhet society can decipher them.

I will sketch one more context. As a father, it bothers me when I see that the children in our village do not learn anything in school that concretely touches upon their life. For example, they learn to read in Spanish, but they do not understand what they read in this foreign language. To put it more explicitly, they learn to imitate certain things, but they do not really make these their own. At the same time, as a father alone, I am not able to provide my daughters (whose mother tongue is Enlhet) with successful learning. To escape my doubts and worries, then, I am often tempted to close my eyes and ignore the divide between children’s real needs and the reality of education, to accept what the school system offers, and to bestow upon this system the responsibility for my daughters’ learning – but doing so would only mean clinging to the idle hope that what everyone says about the usefulness of the school system is correct.

The four contexts just laid out describe aspects of a situation that every constructive reflection about the peoples of the Chaco should consider. As for national society, they uncover a logic that is incapable of understanding that the indigenous universe forms a dimension of its own – instead, it disregards and excludes it. As for native societies, they show a divide between an *apparent present* oriented towards projects largely controlled by others, and an underlying *hidden life* managed by indigenous people themselves. The four contexts show, ultimately, that these perspectives of national society and of indigenous societies are of vital relevance to formal schooling and learning in general. In this sense, and in relation to the main theme of “social inclusion, education, languages, and cultures,”\* I transform these four descriptions into two questions that will guide my argumentation below:

- Given the divide between an apparent present and an underlying hidden life, against what background must the concept of *interculturality* be interpreted, among both indigenous societies and non-indigenous people?
- What consequences does this divide have for conceptions of education?

### Enlhet Accounts

The four initial observations make clear that my reflections bear on concrete persons and societies. For that reason, I need to clarify the starting point that informs my thinking and actions with respect to this context – the work of *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet*, “making our Enlhet language grow.”<sup>5</sup> In 1995, we started our work with the goal of fortifying the Enlhet, Toba-Enenlhet, and Guaná languages, and collected, with a primarily linguistic focus, several accounts related by Enlhet elders. We soon realized that they were talking about a world that was navigated very differently from today’s world, but still their

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\* A reference to the arrival of the Mennonite colonizers starting in 1927, which accelerated the process of cultural assimilation of the indigenous peoples of the Chaco.

\* This was the topic of the seminar at which these ideas were originally presented, and of the resulting volume in which this chapter was originally published (cited above).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet* in general, and our publications more specifically, please consult [www.enlhet.org](http://www.enlhet.org).

accounts fit in well with present-day life. This apparent contradiction awakened our interest in the Enlhet universe, and we started systematically visiting the Enlhet elders, and to a lesser extent the Toba-Enenlhet and Guaná elders, to collect their accounts.

Starting in 2000, we published some monolingual books in Enlhet, Toba-Enenlhet, and Guaná which contain a small portion of the accounts we collected. In 2001, we also started weekly radio broadcasts consisting of carefully edited versions of accounts collected in the six Enlhet-Enenlhet languages.\* These broadcasts have had much more far-reaching effects than the books, since they inserted the contents of the respective accounts more widely and more directly into Enlhet society than the books. I will treat the discussions and processes that these audio editions have started amongst the Enlhet in more depth in section "Our Concrete Experience," and in that section we will also examine in more depth the relation (or opposition) between writing and orality. For now, I will only note that the elders realized that these radio programs give them an opportunity to publicly express experiences, observations, and reflections that were excluded from the public domain for a long time. On top of that, some of them have taken our work as an unexpected opportunity to pass their heritage on to their people. In response to this, we began to systematically delve more deeply into the accounts of a selected group of speakers of both genders. Together, they cover on the one hand the different parts of the territory of the Enlhet, and on the other hand various important topics such as the first contacts with the Mennonite colonists who settled their lands, the political dimension of recent history, the environment, ways of living together, celebrations, and the spiritual dimension of life.

Throughout the process of collecting and expanding on their accounts, we have entered into extensive dialogues with many Enlhet elders. Their accounts have provided us with a panoramic view of the Enlhet world, of their traditions, and of their recent history. At the same time, they have allowed us to better understand the present, for example with respect to the dynamics of the relations between the Enlhet and the society that surrounds them, the dimensions of communication, and spaces for learning. Our continued participation in day-to-day Enlhet life, our growing understanding of the interactions between the traditional and present-day dimensions, and the effects of the collected accounts in Enlhet society have come together to form a new perspective on how to think about *interculturality* and *education* from the perspective of native society. Before laying out this perspective, however, I need to describe the ideological conditions that determine how indigenous and non-indigenous people currently interpret the concept of interculturality within the framework of formal education.

### **Interculturality: The Point of Departure**

Schooling portrays itself as a mechanism to include indigenous peoples in the life of national society and to grant them participation. Nevertheless, a brief look at the reality of schooling amongst the peoples of the Chaco shows that such inclusion has not been achieved. One can see clearly that schooling has completely excluded the autochthonous dimension: it is constructed from the outside, it is controlled from the outside, its contents come from the outside, and so do its methodologies and the forms it takes.<sup>6</sup> In parallel, formal schooling

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\* Apart from Enlhet (Norte), Toba-Enenlhet, and Guaná, this language family also consists of Énxet Sur, Sanapaná, and Angaité.

<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasize that I am talking about the *reality of education*, not about *theoretical approaches* that consider the autochthonous dimension and autochthonous society in formal schooling. Even though the Educational Reforms of the 1990s called for community involvement in the educational endeavor, such participation has in practice remained limited to the maintenance of school infrastructure. In parallel, the processes of disdain

ignores the fact that an emphasis on *relating* is a foundational principle of autochthonous societies – it removes students from real life and from their communities. What it does succeed in, if anything, is assimilating indigenous *individuals* to the categories it promotes. On the inside of native society, this creates divisions and destroys the constructive forces that constitute it.<sup>7</sup> On the outside, it does not contribute anything to the creation of spaces which indigenous societies as such can hold within national society. On the contrary: formal schooling reaffirms the model of *unidirectional relations* advocated by national society, which states that in order to establish relations with this national society, one must move into spaces dominated by it. In order to communicate with it, indigenous people must learn Spanish; in order to be granted the right to participate in it, they must move through the national education system with its own particular history and its non-indigenous content; in order to have access to medical support, they must abandon their own integrated models of health care. In short, indigenous peoples and persons are not allowed to participate *on their own conceptual terms*, and inclusion turns out to be mere shorthand for assimilation, because inclusion at the price of negating oneself does not allow for participation. Instead, it destroys native constructive dimensions, and it leads to a negative image of one's own native universe: it involves a subtle interplay of exclusion and coincident subjugation. Indeed, this model of unidirectional relations corresponds to an ideology of subjugation. Nowadays, one quite commonly finds that indigenous people have appropriated this ideology of subjugation, but from the perspective of submissiveness: they have developed a consciousness of submission.

To be able to lay out proposals for the present, one must of course have a keen understanding of the historical processes that have led to present-day ideological conditions. In the present work, however, it is impossible to touch upon all of these – I will only note that these processes started with the simultaneous occurrence of three events in the early 1930s in the middle of the Enlhet territory: the arrival of large numbers of Mennonite immigrants, the Chaco War, and a smallpox epidemic which killed about half of the Enlhet population (Unruh & Kalisch 2008; Kalisch & Unruh 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022; Kalisch 2020). Before these events, the Enlhet were independent – nowadays, they live in working-class neighborhoods or rural communities under intense long-term supervision by Mennonite settlers which creates omnipresent political and ideological pressures. In parallel, although daily life itself is still in keeping with the Enlhet's own traditions, frameworks of expression are centered around proposals from the outside that are evident, for example, in the ever-present discourse of “development”, in educational discourse, missionary discourse, and discourses of political representation. Whether or not these proposals from the outside are made in good faith (and in fact, in many cases they instead reflect the concrete interests of those who put them forth), their ways of thinking and arguing both start from and are geared towards a domain which does not take into account people's lived experience. In other words, they have no basis in native contexts which would allow them to be implemented on indigenous people's own terms. Focusing on such external proposals (which are continuously reinforced through concrete projects) therefore in fact means focusing on things controlled by others, even though they purport to provide a way to overcome the exclusion people feel within a unidirectional relation characterized by a multitude of pressures. Even though

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towards people's own language that we have recently observed in Enlhet society start precisely with those Enlhet who have gone through secondary education.

<sup>7</sup> The individualization of education leads people to have disdain for their own native values which would prompt them to form relationships rather than isolate themselves. Concretely, participating in communal life is becoming an individual skill and consequently, violence within communities and even within families has seen a marked increase. This leads to the destruction of both persons and societies.

imitation of the discourses that express these proposals gives people the impression of achieving participation (for example, they are quickly affirmed and encouraged by the agents of those proposals), it entails becoming dependent on such agents. Simply put: the exclusion people feel facilitates their subjugation. In this sense, for example, school itself is perceived as a path towards participation, and Enlhet people defend even its most alienating forms, but they do not have any influence over its design nor its implementation. In this way, it easily cements itself as a tool through which national society (as well as Mennonite settlers, who organize the schooling process in coordination with the State) acts upon autochthonous societies. In fact, it functions as an important mechanism of colonization, and it has contributed significantly to deepening the divide between discursive frameworks and real life – the aforementioned rift between an apparent present and an underlying hidden life (section “Introduction”).

I wish to pause for a moment at this observation that Enlhet life is centered around two different frames of reference. One of them can be described as consisting of discursive projections about the present and the future that come from outside proposals and pay little mind to the concrete construction of day-to-day life. The other can be described as consisting of the lived present which is continually constructed on traditions managed by the Enlhet people themselves, even though this frame of reference is excluded from the public sphere and therefore relatively unavailable for shared reflection and constructive transformation by Enlhet society. I want to highlight that these two frames of reference do not correspond to a temporal axis from past to present, but to an axis from desires and postulations on the one hand to lived reality on the other hand. The two frames of reference – and this is of central importance – are not connected at all. As a consequence, expression (and often reflection as well) trudges onwards with projections and claims, while real life is torn apart by judgements along the lines of “we still have not achieved X”, which is what prompts me to speak of a *negative image of one’s own universe*. This situation is also in line with the fact that opportunities for indigenous people to take initiatives of their own are replaced by a passive waiting for initiatives by third parties, leaving no space for protagonism on their own terms, but instead paralyzing native societies. In other words, this situation is in line with structures of dependence on others which in turn seem to strengthen and justify the existence of unidirectional relations imposed by the surrounding society.

The concept of *interculturality* attempts to resolve this unidirectional situation and to include both parties. To that end, it initiates a dialogue about how to proportionately allocate space to the “modern” and that which is autochthonous in formal education. Nevertheless, given the aforementioned ideological conditions, it can only be expected that both in indigenous societies and in national society, the Non-Indigenous continues to be the main frame of reference – the mere fact that we continue to speak of “education” is a clear indicator of this.<sup>8</sup> So, although including *elements* of autochthonous traditions has given the impression that autochthonous *societies* have been included, in reality a model of unidirectional relations still reigns supreme, with all the colonial domination that this implies. Taking these facts into account, I maintain a degree of methodological skepticism regarding any proposal that speaks of interculturality, and I avoid this term in my own proposal for the construal of education in the colonial context (see also Kalisch 2022a).

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of education itself is one-directional (see section “Ways of Thinking about Education”), so it cannot be *intercultural*. That is to say, the term “intercultural education” is a contradiction, or the *intercultural* is not *inter*.

This brings us to the second guiding question laid out above. Through this question, I am suggesting that discussing educational concepts requires close consideration of the consequences of the divide between the lived present as constituted by traditions managed by the people themselves, and discursive and reflexive projections about the present and future prompted by outside proposals. In addition, by referring to the *colonial context*, I am suggesting that any discussion of educational concepts should include the relationships between native societies and national society. In this way, the second guiding question can be further divided into three topics to be treated in the discussion below:

- The way education is thought about;
- The way indigenous peoples are thought about;
- The way the relation between national society and indigenous peoples is thought about.

### **Our Concrete Experience: Writing, Orality, and Autochthonous Languages**

The way in which I focus on these three axes is determined by our concrete experience. Making reference to writing and orality, in turn, allows a paradigmatic approach to them. Even after more than five decades of formal schooling in Enlhet society, the number of written texts produced in the Enlhet language is close to zero; therefore, there is no established readership either.<sup>+</sup> Writing has never been thought of as a tool for the construction of autochthonous concepts.<sup>9</sup> Instead, following the logic of the initial anecdote, this tool of non-indigenous traditions is usually conceived of as something that starts from and is geared towards the Non-Indigenous. It has even been used, and it continues to be used, to subjugate and exclude indigenous people and their societies. In parallel, a strong association between writing and the Spanish language is salient to both indigenous and non-indigenous people. Given these conditions, the common practice of publishing indigenous accounts in Spanish (whether it be in monolingual or bilingual publications) fortifies this impression that important things can only be said in Spanish and implies that native languages are not even good vehicles to express their own native contents. That is to say, it transfers colonial domination to the heart of autochthonous meanings themselves, and it fosters a sense of doubt in the Indigenous (Kalisch 2005). Taking these conditions into account, it was always clear to us that we would publish the collected Enlhet-Enenlhet accounts monolingually.<sup>10</sup>

So, although we started our editing and publishing work with a critical attitude towards the written modality, we did not question the idea of publishing these Enlhet contributions in written form. Nevertheless, the elders made clear to us that native history and cultural traditions are not the only consideration. They also showed us a constructive dynamic of their own: orality. This allowed us to distance ourselves from a presupposed unique dominance of the written word, and to seek alternative ways of editing and publishing

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<sup>+</sup> This situation has not changed in the decade since this article was originally written.

<sup>9</sup> The non-indigenous perception that autochthonous concepts and experiences are only worthwhile when they are presented to non-indigenous society goes hand in hand with the continuous orientation of indigenous peoples towards the outside. Often, when Enlhet people themselves speak about their autochthonous universe, they seem to present it for outsiders rather than conceiving of it as a resource for the construction of their own concepts and society. In this way, for example, people sometimes organize traditional feasts only so that Mennonite settlers can see them.

<sup>10</sup> I will not discuss in detail practical questions such as the translation of an oral account to a medium that is not natural for it – writing – nor will I repeat that writing must be explored as a dimension of *construction* to be useful (Unruh & Kalisch 2003b; Kalisch 2006-2018).

the accounts – even in the knowledge that the act of publication itself requires separating the account from its author, this way of publishing had become necessary since the oral modality has declined amongst the Enlhet and it is no longer common for these accounts to be transmitted orally. Consequently, in addition to just being monolingual, most of our publications exist in an oral modality (as audio or video). That is to say, on top of using the Enlhet's own language, they approximate autochthonous modes of expression more closely than writing does. These audio and audiovisual publications offer a much more realistic way for sharing that which comes from people's own native tradition than books, because no one reads, but many people listen and watch.<sup>+</sup>

The effects of the aforementioned broadcasting of audio editions on the radio have significantly influenced my thinking, and I briefly summarize them here. The monolingual and audio(visual) publications give a public voice to that which was no longer expressed publicly. At the same time, they encourage many elders who remained silent for many years to participate. The ways in which they express themselves show that their accounts are not just memories of the past, but the manifestation of a way of seeing and being in the world that remains relevant. In this way, by simply pronouncing their accounts, they already reinvigorate a process of reflection within the framework of a long tradition of expression and dialogue.<sup>+</sup> At the same time, there are positive repercussions amongst the Enlhet people: they are fascinated when they see how the face of their people re-appears in spite of a multitude of processes of oblivion and suppression. They are eager to understand aspects of their lives and of the world which they have seen, but which they are no longer in control of. They also start to realize what they have lost, which allows them to feel a pain that has been suppressed for many years. In addition to this, a discussion has started to grow in Enlhet society in which a position of submissiveness to the outside and a position of reflection starting from people's own native traditions are opposed to each other. In summary, as people share the Enlhet's own traditional constructive potential, as the elders do in their accounts, native meanings are re-inserted into society, encouraging people to continue speaking and listening, to discuss and rethink the present. The widespread and continued discussion throughout the population calls into question, by virtue of its mere existence, the divide between the lived present constructed on people's autochthonous traditions, and the discursive and reflexive projections about the present and the future that come from foreign proposals. At the same time, it leads to management of concrete criteria for judgment that allow the divide to be overcome. In this way, the process discussed here aims to overcome negative attitudes towards the native universe from within.

With the description of this experience as a starting point, I now return to my proposal for modes of education and forms of relating that pay attention to the native dimension. I present this proposal in relation to the three themes indicated above.

### **Ways of Thinking about Education**

This incipient process aiming to overcome negative attitudes towards one's own native universe, which has the potential to reconstruct present-day Enlhet society, fundamentally relies on the protagonism of indigenous peoples themselves and depends on

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<sup>+</sup> The topic of this paragraph is widely discussed in Kalisch (2018b, 2022b). The audio and audiovisual publications can be found at <https://enlhet.org/audiovisual.html>.

<sup>+</sup> In 2021, almost all the elders with which we worked have passed away. This means that the communicative process mentioned here no longer includes the authors of these accounts themselves. Instead, the accounts function as input for a discussion in Enlhet society, which simultaneously makes the accounts its own and constantly transforms them.



what they themselves construct. Like any profound transformation, however, such a process cannot be fortified independently of educational spaces. So, to foster this transformation rather than nip it in the bud, we need a mode of education that can support indigenous people's own processes of protagonism and initiative. Formal schooling, however, is an initiative from the State and its society, and describes a process where the educator who is supposed to guide learning has the initiative. It is therefore doubly unidirectional, and the above discussion suggests that we need to effect a double change in this system of initiatives. In this vein, I propose, firstly, thinking of education as *from* rather than *for* autochthonous societies. Secondly, I suggest thinking of the learning process from the point of view of *learning* rather than from the point of view of education – this means construing it as a process in which the learner actively participates, accompanied by the society in which s/he lives. Such a proposal fully corresponds to traditional Enlhet models of learning and its accompaniment, which I discuss in more detail in Kalisch (2006-2018, 2018a).<sup>+</sup>

This conceptual change means that we must not design *modes of education*, but rather create *preconditions for learning*: a kind of learning supported by the dimensions of indigenous society itself. I propose that we start a process of thinking *from within* indigenous society, and that we re-initiate constructive processes from the inside. This means thinking about a type of learning which makes use of what is within learners' reach, because it is rooted in what their society manages on its own initiative – it is worth mentioning that this continuously expands and changes. It also means making use of constructive dynamics within society. Those dynamics are vital in allowing learners to take the initiative in their own learning process, and in allowing their society to take the initiative in accompanying them.<sup>11</sup> When we think, for example, about the opposition between the written and the oral modality, it is clear that the constructive dimension used by autochthonous society is the oral modality – no matter how much that dimension has broken down nowadays – rather than the written one. An educational system based on the written modality therefore makes protagonism on the part of autochthonous society impossible and creates structures of dependence on national society. That is to say, the opposition between orality and writing is reflected in the opposition between indigenous versus foreign initiative, as is the opposition between learning and formal education.

In section “The Place of Relations with Surrounding Society”, I will touch upon some necessary preconditions for overcoming the relation between the written modality and external initiative. This relation is limiting because writing could well become a constructive tool for indigenous society itself. Here, however, I want to emphasize that the establishment of an approach of *learning from within* implies that the affirmation of the native universe from within is a necessary precondition for constructing life in such a way that it does not get caught up in structures of dependence (Kalisch 2012). In parallel, positing a process of *learning from within* also requires ways of *relating from within* (that is, not rejecting one's own categories in the process of relating with an Other), which means that the three themes mentioned above (ways of thinking about education and learning, ways of thinking about autochthonous societies, and ways of relating to the surrounding society) are closely related to each other, and proposals from within are both methodological and political in nature. In this article, however, I will limit myself to discussing the methodological aspect. I will first discuss the role of that which comes from people's own native tradition, i.e. that which is not

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<sup>+</sup> Kalisch (2014, 2020) in turn describes the historical process which forced the Enlhet to accept the school as an institution in their society.

<sup>11</sup> In this sense, thinking from within indigenous society also means looking for strategies for the colonized society to recover its initiative.

easily visible, because even though this is part of the lives of younger generations of indigenous peoples, in the colonial context it has become difficult for them to put into words. In other words, I will discuss issues that touch upon the way autochthonous society imagines itself. Afterwards, I discuss the place of relating to surrounding society in my proposal for learning from within.

### **The Place of That Which Comes from Indigenous People's Own Tradition**

The model of learning from within is closely connected to the protagonism of indigenous society, and relies on this society accompanying any type of learning. Therefore, even though it does not require eliminating formal schooling completely, it does require it to be thoroughly reimagined. This article is not the place to elaborate on how to imagine the ways in which autochthonous society can accompany this learning, nor on the role formal schooling can play in this process. Instead, I want to emphasize that I am not talking about a type of learning limited to transmitting knowledge about elements of autochthonous tradition. I am not talking about teaching people about their own traditions, but about a type of learning based on broad discussion in native society. I am talking about a type of learning that is founded on the dimension of a reinforced orality and that is generated and maintained through a process of sharing, as were traditional learning practices. It should be remembered that the dynamic of orality involves the construction and reconstruction of an affirmed and activated logical frame of reference, and thus allows for learning to be generated from within its own native logic and terms and using its own categories, while at the same time connecting with ongoing communication in autochthonous society. In summary, I am talking about a type of learning against the backdrop of an *affirmed consciousness* of the concepts native society handles skillfully, be they traditional or not. Regardless of whether we imagine learning as being accompanied in this way inside or outside of school,<sup>12</sup> by anchoring learning in a socially shared and negotiated frame of reference, the people can not only transmit knowledge and logics, practices, and attitudes, but they can also reinforce criteria of quality – criteria on which to base judgments – that are rooted in a shared consciousness and guide reflection, dialogue, and action. All of this taken together allows learners to acquire critical differentiation skills that are based on criteria handled by their own society, and are opposed to the creation of discourses centered more on desires than on the observation of, and interaction with, their own reality. It prepares learners to overcome the paralyzing divides between an apparent present and an underlying hidden way of life, and the negative attitudes towards their own native universe that come along with them. It prepares learners to recover initiative.

Part of the methodological dimension of orality is the dimension of *meanings*. Let us return, therefore, to the accounts of the elders. I said before that that which people manage skillfully is not synonymous to “the traditional”. At the same time, though, the present is the result of a concrete historical process. Therefore, these accounts, which refer to an experience from the past, are of vital importance to the process of recovering protagonism on native society's own terms. Before explaining why this is the case, we should take a moment to emphasize the considerable diversity found in these accounts. The Toba-Enenlhet elder Melietkesammap (2007), for example, offers a complex presentation of the history of his people, with its relations with national society as a central theme. Metyeeyam' (2010), for his part, summarizes the history of the Enlhet from the perspective of subjugation, and Kenteem

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<sup>12</sup> In any case, anchoring learning in a reaffirmed consciousness of the internal universe allows schooling and indigenous society to interact in a new way: schooling can become a tool for this society, instead of being used to act upon it from the outside.

(2007) does so from the perspective of dispossession (see amongst others Unruh & Kalisch 2013; Kalisch & Unruh 2018, 2020, 2022 for further English and Spanish editions of accounts of Enlhet elders). In this way, based on a multitude of criteria, they provide a reading of the present-day life of their people which includes the historical dimension and is anchored in their society's own experiences. One effect of this is, for example, that history does not remain an experience exclusively of others, as does the official version of history taught in school. Other authors look back on Enlhet territoriality, simultaneously presenting political categories and ways of relating to nature which constitute an alternative to destructive present-day practices, and clearly show the need to reverse those. Others speak about the practice of sharing, which includes an indigenous logic of production and consumption. This logic remains relevant for present-day practice, even though it enters in constant conflict with the currently dominant economic model. Other authors focus on practices of social coexistence, or on the spiritual dimension (for example, ritual healing by elders). All of them describe a complex way of living, being, thinking, and acting in their accounts, showing clearly that the aforementioned themes form an integrated whole. They put forward a logic that younger generations can understand, because it still determines the present-day life of their native society. At the same time, they provide concrete parameters and terms that determine and describe the dimensions of their own native universe and are centered around values and goals which are still in force. In this way, they allow for reflection about events and situations, about attitudes and actions which younger generations know from experience or from hear-say, but whose conceptual parameters they are no longer actively proficient in.<sup>13</sup> They also allow people to express themselves in terms of their own categories, and therefore to reconstruct and renew their own life in an organic way. In this sense, the accounts together form a foundation of reflections that fit in with people's own frame of reference, and a foundation of expressions that help people in putting into clear words their reflections and observations. They offer a complex background of methodological proposals which guide their practice; and of proposals and ideas that go beyond that which is visible in daily life. In this way, they create the tension between the visible and the possible which is indispensable in any learning process.

In this way, reflection and expression starting from people's own traditional universe can support the reaffirmation of a positive consciousness of this own universe, of that which is part of their everyday existence. The combination of this incipient positive consciousness, the concrete criteria that people learn to apply, and the contrast with the present furthermore allows people to recover motivations and hopes, and to develop concrete visions. In this way, indigenous society can amplify its sphere of action starting from within. Enlhet society can create the conditions for rekindling its constructive dynamics and to stop placing their hopes in education from without which *individuals* might receive. In short, reflection and expression starting from the traditional universe have an important potential for creating possibilities for protagonism within native society itself.

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<sup>13</sup> The issue is more complex than a simple loss of parameters. On top of this, a resignification of concepts and symbols has taken place following the logic of subjugation and submission. For example, the concept of *nengelaasekhammalhkoo*, which refers to a mutual respect and kindness starting from both parties' own initiative, is still perceived by the Enlhet as a central cultural value. Nowadays, however, people no longer think about it as starting from one's own initiative, but as an initiative that one demands from the other as a matter of ethical obligation (Kalisch 2011). With such an inverted reading, this central cultural value is paralyzing, and not only in that it prompts people to await initiatives coming from others. It also leads to conflicts because it prompts people to blame others when they do not take such initiatives. The accounts remind people of the original reading of the term, while at the same time providing concrete criteria that can help them overcome the inverted reading.

By way of example, I will discuss two effects of the accounts in this sense. Firstly, inasmuch as they are inserted into the social sphere, they interact with a wide range of knowledge, perceptions, and reflections present throughout Enlhet society. This connection allows for the people themselves to systematize and amplify the information that lies contained within them, and at the same time it helps maintain access to the meanings, knowledge, and history of their own tradition. In this way, the supposedly absolute need for outside (academic) research that attempts to understand and systematize indigenous dimensions in order to start educational processes is overcome. Secondly, the insertion of the accounts into social dynamics fosters the aforementioned differentiation skills. For example, elders say “we used to eat meat every day” – this makes clear that when they speak of “hunger” in the past, they are referring to a transitory hunger during their daily life, unlike today’s “hunger”, which is an expression of misery. This differentiation between two different types of situations prevents the straightforward projection of present-day categories onto experiences which are not the same. At the same time, it makes possible a new reading of the present which surpasses the current limits of reflection, because people see that the present-day situation is not the only possible one, nor is it even the best possible one. This calls into question people’s negative attitudes towards their own universe while at the same time increasing the possibility and the need for real action. For example, the Enlhet no longer hold the belief that immigrants came and saved them from hunger as strongly as they did a couple of years ago. That is to say, they understand that they were not always the object of dynamics started from the outside, but that they rather were agents in their own right. In fact, discourses of submission are slowly changing.

I have laid out the potential of a type of learning rooted in those aspects of life that are in one way or another based on the native tradition, with respect to both methodologies and contents. The formulation of such a process of learning from within involves many practical and theoretical issues that go beyond what I have laid out here, as I discuss in more depth in Kalisch (2006-2018). Topics that need to be expanded upon include, for example, orality as a dialogical act of sharing; the contents of the learning process; the need to insist on criteria for quality that are shared across society as a whole; the importance of the diversity of life, of the territorial context, and of the environment for the learning process; motivations for learning and for accompanying such learning; the importance of the society’s own language and of guides for learning who come from the community and continue to be part of it. Additionally, the need to overcome negative attitudes towards one’s own native universe must be addressed in more detail, as must the need to reinforce communicative dynamics within autochthonous society. Without touching upon these topics here, I want to emphasize that everything I have said here about learning processes from within rests on a reinforced and assumed orality.<sup>+</sup> That is to say, it is concerned with a condition of native society, and it depends on how this society imagines and creates itself. Today, Enlhet society seems far removed from what I propose here, given that outside pressures and their impacts continuously encourage developments in the opposite direction: they propose, and lead people to, an even stronger orientation towards those things that are uniquely dependent on outside initiatives, which in turn causes the people themselves to depend on such outside initiatives. This brings to the forefront another fundamental issue – that of how the present proposal for learning from within reflects the process of relating to the surrounding society, and what is

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<sup>+</sup> Here, this term is not used in opposition to writing, but it rather refers to a society which functions through intensive dynamics of communication.

(or what should be) the point of access to what comes from the surrounding society in such a proposal.

### Ways of Relating: Spaces of One's Own

As I pointed out above (section “Interculturality: The Point of Departure”), formal schooling brings with it the idea that indigenous students should be taught mechanisms to successfully interact with surrounding society. There is even a widely held belief that any type of education that does not first and foremost guarantee participation in national society harms and excludes indigenous peoples. The educational practices that come with such ideas have clear consequences. On the one hand, such practices override the protagonism of autochthonous society. They can easily correspond to attempts to change the Other – a course of action that is ethically unacceptable, since it follows the same logic as practices for the subjugation of the Other.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, learning is a complex and integrated process for children and cannot be reduced to preparing people for movement into another society (as formal schooling does), much less to changing autochthonous society at large. Doing so imposes an unnatural purpose on the learning process: instead of supporting persons in the process of forming themselves, it obeys colonialist goals – the learning process itself is instrumentalized and abused under the concept of formal education. Altogether, the combination of formal education on the one hand, and the dominant society projecting itself onto autochthonous society on the other hand, is problematic. With a view to an alternative model of education, then, we need an alternative model of relating.

We must keep in mind, in this regard, that we are talking about a unidirectional concept of relating whose reasoning both starts from and is aimed towards national society: in order to interact with it, one must move into spaces dominated by it (see section “Interculturality: The Point of Departure”). As I have argued above, relations built in this way paralyze autochthonous society. I maintain, therefore, that people cannot adequately build relations starting from a position in which an Other has placed them, and it is likewise unacceptable to create, on the Other's behalf, the conditions from which s/he must build relations. Instead, everyone must build relations starting from where s/he is, *from within*. Such a way of relating from within takes into account the fact that indigenous societies are full-fledged societies in their own right, with full-fledged languages and cultures. As full-fledged organisms, they deserve the opportunity to live and imagine themselves starting from that which is their own, in order to then interact with others in a multicultural and multiethnic society that is *multisystemic* – that is to say, to participate on their own conceptual terms – rather than accessing participation in a dominant and one-dimensional society at the cost of renouncing their own minority world. The latter conception of “participation” would lead to an enslavement to the categories of national society which would destroy the integrity of these culturally diverse societies – it would mutilate them. Relating from within, on the other hand, is inclusive since it enshrines both one's own perspective and that of the Other, but it is not the same as including autochthonous society in existing spaces. That is to say, the alternative to exclusion is not *inclusion*, but rather the development of *spaces of one's own* which are free from external pressures – a necessary precondition for balanced relations that

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<sup>14</sup> Colonization commonly attempts to change indigenous societies through formal schooling of their children (Kalisch 2014, 2020). In this vein, for example, missionary education has explicitly attempted to civilize indigenous peoples. Public education, even though it uses different framing, follows this same tradition – the notion that indigenous people “need to learn more” corresponds to this same idea, as does the well-known slogan of “educating for development.”

grant both sides the opportunity to take up initiative and protagonism.<sup>15,\*</sup> In the same way, the alternative to unidirectional relating is not bi-directional relating but balanced relating. In other words, what is necessary is not intercultural spaces. Instead, it is cultural spaces of one's own which are essential to any possibility of balanced relating: such thriving cultural spaces are an absolute necessity. Therefore, balanced relations require the reaffirmation of one's own universe, and consequently, they require people to overcome the aforementioned consciousness of submission which had its origins in a context of exclusion.

The concept of spaces of one's own becomes more concrete if we interpret it in the context of the Enlhet accounts and the spaces that do in fact exist for them. They do not appear in present-day formal schooling. Non-Enlhet teachers – the majority of teachers in Enlhet schools – do not have access to them since they do not speak Enlhet. Enlhet teachers, on the other hand, who have throughout their professional careers only engaged with content and methods from national society, are scared of them because just any unknown thing, they make them feel insecure. Given this situation, it seems difficult to think of a way of including such accounts that could overcome the structural limits of the school as a space for education. Nevertheless, this structural exclusion can be overcome through the development of native spaces, and processes of communication amongst Enlhet society.

### **The Place of Relations with Surrounding Society**

Let us come back to the proposal for a process of learning from within. This proposal maintains that learners are formed paradigmatically within their own dimensions, which puts the conditions in place for them to then enter unknown spaces with relative ease. It also allows them to take up that which is their own in a positive way, which is indispensable for any kind of balanced relation with an Other. In this sense, I maintain that neither learning nor formal schooling are adequate spaces from which to think about relations or about access to that which comes from surrounding society. Instead, bridges towards the dominant society and towards that which comes from this dominant society must be developed by indigenous society as a whole, as an autochthonous construction with regard to the Non-Indigenous. These bridges will later be incorporated again as part of the process of learning from within. Establishing in this way the inner circle of autochthonous society as a constructive space, learning can be safeguarded as an integrated experience, since it is not limited to learning for relating to dominant society, and at the same time it makes it possible to overcome colonialist pressures in education. Such a proposal takes into account the fact that autochthonous societies in the Chaco have always been very focused on relating to others. So, to the extent that people can overcome the consciousness of submission and stop uncritically surrendering to foreign initiatives, the construction of bridges (which actually simply creates an extension of their own universe) can function well. In fact, it functions well at this very moment. In sum, my proposal for a process of learning from within does not condemn indigenous societies to keep treading water indefinitely, as people often contend that proposals which value the

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<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that both sides are the same, nor that they exist under the same (material and other) conditions, because they do not have identical goals (nor do they necessarily focus on the material aspect). Saying that “all people have the same worth,” then, may be confusing, since both sides are not “equal” – they do not have the same values. But they do have the same dignity.

\* The confusion pointed out by the author in footnote 14 stems from the Spanish phrase *tener el mismo valor* (‘worth’), *pero no los mismos valores* (‘principles, values’). This play on words works because *valor* may refer to either (1) an exact, quantifiable (e.g. numerical) “value,” (2) a more abstract “worth, dignity,” or (3) “principles” which guide the imagination of one’s desired personal and social life. When the author says that “all people have the same *valor*,” this is ambiguous between readings (2) and (3).

traditional dimension do. On the contrary, it takes into account the historical and ethical imperative to allow for persons and societies as a whole to themselves influence the direction and dynamics of their own historical development.

I will draw on the domain of writing to exemplify this process of building bridges. Writing seems to be opposed to indigenous orality, and to actually exclude it, but this exclusion is not necessary. Nevertheless, in order to explore writing as a constructive and creative dimension complementary to that of orality, it must be approached from an Enlhet point of view (Kalisch 2006-2018). Such an exploration starting from people's own universe means that people need to experiment with writing for themselves, within their own methodological, conceptual, and expressive dimensions.<sup>16</sup> This means that the starting point must be people's own language, speech, expressions, and themes, and their solid grasp of these in the oral modality. Bilingual publications, in contrast, do not serve this purpose, and translations from Spanish to Enlhet do so even less. This means that eventually a dialogue must be started with non-indigenous people who have experimented with the written modality themselves. Such a dialogue should not be seen as education on the topic of writing, but rather as what it really is: a dialogue through which people can expand and deepen their own experience.<sup>17</sup> In other words, I am talking about the possibility of an encounter between one's own initiative and an initiative from the outside. Such an encounter between initiatives – the possibility and mutual assumption of initiative – is essential for the construction of balanced relations. No one is fully independent of outside initiatives, but it is important that this dependence be combined with a self-initiated effort to find such external initiatives, and with the possibility to influence the actions of others. In this way, it is not a paralyzing dependence, but rather the interdependence that is part of every reciprocal and balanced way of shared living.

I want to make clear, then, that I am talking about processes within native society that are not independent from attitudes and actions outside of it. That is to say, even though I have been talking from a native perspective, one cannot avoid the fact that, in order to imagine balanced ways of relating and bridge-building, changes in the attitudes of surrounding society are necessary. As long as this society, for example, does not reverse its strategies of subjugation (which are implemented, amongst other means, through formal schooling as it exists today, which is an instrument for pressure rather than dialogue), native attempts at plotting a new course for indigenous peoples will not easily succeed. Instead, native societies need *spaces of their own*, which are free from external pressures and in which they can recover, develop, and try out their own paths. At the same time, they need *spaces for interaction* where they can find answers to any questions they might have. Such spaces should replace externally developed training, which applies formulaic methods conceived outside the community and is rarely successfully appropriated. Such spaces should not serve to simply explain to indigenous people elements that are alien to them, but rather to support them in

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<sup>16</sup> This is true even if we do not see writing as a means of creative expression, but simply as a tool for practical applications such as road signage, writing text messages, or others (which could in turn form the starting point of an authentic native experience with writing).

<sup>17</sup> Within the context of our work, we have attempted to start such an approach. In the face of the enormous destruction of the oral dimension, written texts have been a useful tool for us to systematize accounts in the framework of a large-scale dialogue with their authors. Throughout this concrete work, then, we have come up with ways to re-express these oral accounts in written form, and today a methodological basis for Enlhet writing and written expression is in place and could be used by the Enlhet. Nevertheless, neither reading nor writing are frequently practiced by the Enlhet, and therefore it is unlikely that these written texts will become an efficient way of sharing the messages of the authors with their people – at least in the short to medium term. As long as other ways of socially inserting Enlhet meanings are still functional, this is not a cause for concern.

their own search for solutions. Nor will these typically be formal spaces. Finally, these are not spaces for the population as a whole, but rather for persons who are interested in relating to national society and who can afterwards share their findings with their people. Taking as a starting point a small number of people who have access to such spaces, learning processes for non-traditional elements quickly take root, even if these elements are challenging from a technical point of view. Driving a tractor, for example – a skill the Enlhet need in their jobs working for immigrants – is transmitted within the community itself, not through training organized by outsiders. Similarly, access to so-called new technologies, such as computers or the internet, can be imagined in such a way that these technologies become creative and constructive tools for indigenous peoples, aligned with their own needs and interests.

In sum, the joint establishment of spaces free from external pressures and spaces for interaction would foster again an attitude of curiosity within indigenous societies, which was traditionally present but has, in the face of the impossibility of establishing reciprocal relations with surrounding society, been supplanted by an attitude of waiting and consumption. With such an attitude of curiosity, situated in a context of more balanced interactions, would come increased opportunities for expression and dialogue between the two societies. This would form a basis for a growing mutual comprehension, and consequently for a way of relating without needing to renounce oneself, bringing ever more balance to the relations at hand.

### **Conclusion**

My exposition started from the idea that the basic issue regarding the construction of relations is not how to quantify the importance of one's own concepts and themes compared to those concepts and themes that belong to the Other, but from which position one should start thinking. To make balanced relations possible, each party has to be confident in their own universe when they open themselves up to the Other. Starting from this premise, I have laid out an alternative proposal for education in subjugated native societies, that of "learning from within". I have used the topic of writing and orality as a guiding theme for this argumentation, as it allows me to exemplify the idea of approaching foreign elements starting from one's own dimension, such as one's own language and the oral modality. Taking such an approach, one can appropriate that which is foreign, and complement that which already exists, so that autochthonous populations' opportunities for protagonism on their own terms are guaranteed.

Three reasons prompted me to lay out this alternative proposal. *Firstly*, relation-building by national society with indigenous societies does not start from where indigenous people are situated, but rather from where surrounding society wants them to be, which in practice makes recovering balanced relations impossible. In fact, it reinforces and perpetuates the imbalance between native societies and the society that has subjugated them. *Secondly*, we need a framework for reflection and action that understands and attempts to overcome the negative attitude towards people's own universe and its destructive impact which impedes indigenous people from taking up protagonism on their own terms, leads them to uncritically accept foreign proposals, and makes them dependent on those who herald such supposed alternatives to native life. *Thirdly*, the external educational methods that have been practiced so far remove learners from their lives and their communities and drag them towards personal and ethnic disintegration. These methods have not had any other effect than to deepen the divide between the lived present as established starting from traditions held by the people themselves, and discursive and reflexive projections about the present and the future that come from foreign proposals and that do not leave room for people's own



protagonism. This divide paralyzes autochthonous societies and is reflected in the aforementioned oppositions between indigenous and foreign initiative, between learning and education, between orality and writing. Nevertheless, I have shown that, if these oppositions are taken up as a challenge and reviewed through a critical lens, they can be transformed into complementary pairings. This creates a space for a new constructive dynamic which strengthens both autochthonous society itself and its dynamics of relating to the society surrounding it. As a way of supporting such constructive dynamics, I have sketched a model of learning that gives indigenous societies full protagonism. Indeed, it is built on autochthonous traditions of learning and relating.

Obviously, this work does little more than sketch out a rough framework – many practical and theoretical issues remain to be discussed, negotiated, and reflected on. It must also be stated clearly that the present-day dynamics of neither indigenous societies nor surrounding society give any indications that rapid changes are under way in favor of overcoming projections towards the Non-Indigenous and recovering indigenous people's own initiative. On the contrary, the mechanisms maintaining the present state of subjugation are still very much active. Even so, the proposal laid out here is not utopian, although time, space, decisions, and changes in attitude will be needed for it to be established as a real-world practice. Doubtless we have gotten used to thinking that everything in the social sphere is urgent and that we have no time. But this cannot be taken as an argument in favor of engaging in an activism that continues travelling down a failed road. Instead, what we must do is assess the time and effort needed to start out on a path which enables us to reach our objectives, and to do what is necessary to realize them. We must start to critically and self-critically compare our goals, our achievements, and the life that we share and observe. And above all, we must accept indigenous societies as actors in their own right.

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### **About the Author**

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