



# Use of Indigenous Crafts as a Pedagogical Strategy for the Strengthening of Cultural Identity in Fifth-Grade Students of a Rural Institution in Córdoba (Colombia)

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## Summary

This paper describes a pedagogical proposal that is based on the elaboration of native handicrafts to strengthen the cultural identity of fifth grade students in a rural institution located in the Bajo Sinú region, in Córdoba (Colombia). The project is part of the Research-Action approach and uses local natural materials, such as bulrush, reed and totumo, to rescue traditional artisanal techniques that, despite their heritage and economic importance, have been lost over time. During the intervention, activities were designed in which empirical teachers from the community and students participated, integrating the processes of making artisanal products with reflections on the indigenous legacy and the possibilities of economic sustainability of these practices. The findings reflect an increase in the appreciation of local culture, the appropriation of weaving and carving techniques, as well as an improvement in the understanding of ethnic identity and regional history. It is concluded that the linking of native crafts in the classroom enhances both student motivation and the preservation of cultural memory, promoting meaningful learning and a sense of community belonging.

**Keywords:** indigenous crafts, cultural identity, pedagogical strategy, action research, rural education

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## 1. Introduction

### Introduction

Cultural identity represents one of the fundamental pillars in the comprehensive education of students, since it articulates values, customs, knowledge, and practices that allow them to recognize themselves as part of a community (González Varas, 2000; Freire, 2001). In various rural contexts in Colombia, the school plays a crucial role in the transmission and rescue of this cultural baggage, serving as a bridge between local experiences and formal curricular objectives (Ministry of National Education [MEN], 1998). However, one of the biggest challenges is to ensure that educational content incorporates genuine elements of local tradition, so that students do not perceive learning as something alien or distant from their daily lives.

In the Bajo Sinú region, in the department of Córdoba, indigenous crafts are an ancestral manifestation that has linked communities to their territory since ancient times (Negrette, 2007; Orozco Roqueme, 2013). Fibers such as bulrush, reed and totumo, as well as weaving and carving techniques, are deeply rooted in the indigenous and mestizo heritage of this area, and have been a source of economic sustenance and social cohesion. Despite their relevance, these artisanal practices have been threatened by factors such as modernization, the migration of young people to urban areas, and the replacement of natural materials by industrial products (Vega, 2006). This has led to a gradual loss of traditional crafts and, consequently, a weakening of local identity, to the extent that children do not come into contact with artisanal knowledge or with the stories that surround it.

Faced with this panorama, there is a need to design pedagogical proposals that revalue native crafts as a cultural expression and, at the same time, contribute to the development of key competencies and attitudes for the training of students. Various authors agree that craftsmanship is not only a manual practice, but a formative process in itself, by bringing into play creative, cognitive and social skills (UNESCO, 1997; Linares et al., 2008). In addition, rural education is committed to promoting the active participation of students in their immediate environment, reinforcing collective self-esteem and the sense of belonging through the exaltation of the region's own traits (Arias, 1997; Peña, 2008).

Within the framework of the General Education Law (Law 115 of 1994), which promotes curricular contextualization and the integration of community knowledge, the institution that is the object of this study has sought alternatives to consolidate cultural identity among its fifth-grade students, particularly through the teaching-learning of local crafts. This initiative is based on the belief that the school can play a role in rescuing and energizing traditional practices, by incorporating into its curriculum significant experiences that combine formal instruction with community participation (Machacó López, 2018). In this way, it is intended not only to inculcate manual skills in students, but also to awaken an awareness of the heritage and economic value of plant fibers and crafts, a key element in the history and ethnic identity of the region.

To concretize this proposal, this work is framed in Action Research (Fals Borda, 1999), understood as a methodology that combines the generation of knowledge with the transformation of educational realities. From this perspective, the participants (teachers, students, and master craftsmen) are not limited to receiving external guidelines, but actively contribute to identifying problems, designing intervention strategies, and collaboratively evaluating achievements and difficulties (Freire, 2001). This promotes co-responsibility in the preservation of cultural heritage and strengthens the dialogue between the educational community and local agents, creating the conditions for more contextualized and meaningful learning.

In this sense, indigenous crafts are emerging as a pedagogical resource that integrates artistic education, history, geography and social sciences, as it requires knowledge of the properties of materials, understanding cultural heritage and assuming a commitment to the sustainability of the environment (Roncancio, 1999; Vargas, 2014). At the same time, it involves an economic and entrepreneurial component, since the creation and marketing of products made with natural fibers can open development opportunities for families in rural areas (Linares, Galeano & Vargas, 2004). Thus, the teaching of these artisanal techniques goes beyond the simple acquisition of manual skills, also focusing on the appreciation of cultural diversity and the construction of a collective project that reinforces social cohesion.

The general objective of this research is to describe and analyze the impact of the use of native crafts as a pedagogical strategy for the strengthening of cultural identity in fifth grade students of a rural institution in Córdoba (Colombia). To this end, specific goals are set related to the collection of stories and practices associated with crafts, the integration of such knowledge into the school curriculum through collaborative activities and the evaluation of the transformations observed in the motivation and sense of belonging of schoolchildren. It is hypothesized that community participation and the contextualization of the contents will favor a greater appropriation of the local culture, as well as the development of creative and reflective skills in the students.

Finally, this article is structured as follows: after this introduction, the theoretical framework that supports the proposal is presented, with emphasis on the importance of cultural identity and the role of crafts as an educational resource. Next, the Research-Action methodology is described, detailing the instruments and stages of the intervention. Then, the results are presented and the most relevant findings are discussed, both at the pedagogical and sociocultural levels. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are formulated with a view to the sustainability of the initiative and its replicability in similar rural contexts, reinforcing the premise that education, well contextualized, not only enhances learning, but also contributes to the safeguarding of ancestral traditions and the construction of more cohesive communities.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Type of study

The study is part of Action **Research**, with a qualitative-descriptive approach and the inclusion of some quantitative indicators to evaluate the impact. The project sought, above all, the understanding of social and educational processes related to the rescue of local crafts and their effect on the cultural identity of the students.

#### 3.2. Context and participants

The pedagogical proposal was carried out in an educational center located in the village of Los Amarillos, attached to the Cotocá Abajo Educational Center. We worked with 11 students of the fifth grade (5 girls and 6 boys), aged between 9 and 10 years. 2 teachers, an empirical handicraft teacher and parents also participated in the collection of materials and practical sessions.

#### 3.3. Phases of Action Research

1. **Diagnosis:** Surveys were applied to students and parents to find out their level of familiarity with local handicrafts and vegetable fibers (bulrush, rush, totumo). In addition, class observations were made to identify the degree of interest in the local culture.
2. **Planning:** Based on the findings, a work plan was designed that included theoretical-practical sessions on the importance of crafts, the preparation of raw materials and the elaboration of simple objects (baskets, cup holders, totumo ornaments).
3. **Action:** For two months, weekly meetings were held in which weaving or carving techniques were taught and the history and symbolism of each piece was reflected. Intergenerational dialogue was promoted, inviting an experienced artisan from the community.
4. **Observation:** A field diary was kept and checklists were applied to evaluate student participation, acquired manual dexterity, and conversations about cultural identity.
5. **Reflection and evaluation:** At the end of the intervention stage, the survey was applied again and samples of the work prepared were organized. Improvements in the recognition of cultural traits and in students' motivation for their traditions were analyzed.

### 4. Results

The Research-Action process allowed information to be collected in different phases, giving rise to a detailed overview of the impact that the elaboration of native crafts had on the strengthening of the cultural

identity of fifth grade students. Below, each of the findings is deepened, considering the changes observed at the level of student motivation, the recognition of cultural heritage and the appropriation of artisanal techniques:

#### **4.1. Initial diagnosis**

At the beginning of the project, a questionnaire was applied that sought to assess the degree of familiarity of the students with vegetable fibers (bulrush, reed and totumo) and with the ancestral history of the Bajo Sinú region. The results indicated that 80% of the students were unaware of the practical application of these plants in the elaboration of handicrafts and only 15% related these fibers to the Zenú indigenous tradition. When questioning the families, a break in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge was evident: several parents and grandparents vaguely remembered having seen their elders weaving or carving, but they had not taught these practices to their children because they considered them not very useful in contemporary economic dynamics. In addition to this, in the classroom observations it was found that most of the students did not identify artisanal production as part of their cultural identity; In their imagination, general folkloric references predominated (for example, typical dances or gastronomy) without a clear link with the manual trades of the environment. This initial distance was also reflected in the lack of motivation when addressing the subject in class: most saw the mention of "local crafts" as something anecdotal and not as a significant content.

#### **4.2. Development of pedagogical action**

Based on the diagnosis, theoretical-practical sessions were designed that combined the presentation of the history and symbolism of local crafts with the progressive elaboration of simple products. The first stage consisted of the collection of raw materials: bulrush and reed, obtained in nearby wetlands, as well as totumo trees in the environment. These field trips aroused great curiosity in the students, who for the first time actively participated in the identification of the plants and in the selection of the most suitable specimens for each object. Subsequently, the guest master craftsman demonstrated the basic cleaning, drying and cutting techniques, emphasizing the importance of respecting the natural cycle of resources to ensure their renewal. Each student began the elaboration of a simple object, such as a small basket or a cup holder, and the personalization of the designs was promoted, integrating traditional motifs with children's own ideas. At the same time, in the subjects of social sciences and art, topics on the Zenú indigenous legacy and the historical role of crafts in the economic dynamics of the region were addressed, encouraging reflection on how these practices shape collective identity.

#### **4.3. Observation and adjustments during the intervention**

The flexible nature of the Research-Action allowed the strategies to be adjusted according to the response of the students and the contributions of the master craftsman. After the first two weeks, there was a noticeable increase in participation: the initial reservation was transformed into enthusiasm when it was discovered that weaving and carving required not only manual skills, but also creativity and cooperation. For example, small teams were formed to help each other collect fibers and correct errors in weaving, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and solidarity in the classroom. The teacher kept a field diary where he wrote down the children's impressions during the process, highlighting comments such as "my grandmother did this" or "we can sell what we make in the neighborhood." These expressions evidenced the awakening of a sense of usefulness and transcendence in artisanal activity, which went from being seen as something merely manual to a practice with social and cultural implications.

Likewise, moments of dialogue were organized in which oral histories shared by relatives or members of the community were collected, who told anecdotes about times when crafts were the main source of income. These stories nourished the discussions in the classroom, encouraging students to identify analogies between past realities and the current context. The master craftsman, for his part, introduced variations in the techniques to show the versatility of bulrush and reed, adding the possibility of decorating with natural dyes. This dynamism motivated the children to experiment with different plots and designs, merging traditional motifs with personal influences, which strengthened their sense of cultural ownership.

#### 4.4. Evaluation and final findings

At the end of the eight weeks of intervention, the questionnaire was applied again to measure changes in the students' perception of local crafts and their relationship with cultural identity. 90% expressed a greater understanding of the processes of collection and transformation of fibers, recognizing them as a heritage legacy that deserved to be preserved. In their comments, the students emphasized that crafts were not only "something of the past", but a possibility to generate income in the present and, especially, a source of pride in the history of the region. About 70% satisfactorily completed the elaboration of a handmade object with an acceptable finish, and in several cases family initiatives were reported to continue producing or improving designs at home.

Another of the outstanding achievements was the consolidation of a more coherent discourse around local identity. Before the intervention, only 20% of the students related crafts to their culture. At the end, that percentage rose to 80%, evidencing the appropriation of historical and indigenous references linked to manual production. In the same way, the collaborative and reflective nature of the initiative reinforced the cohesion of the group and contributed to the appreciation of cooperative work. Many students expressed their desire to exhibit their creations at school fairs or to start small sales in the neighborhood, thus expressing their awareness of the socio-cultural and economic potential of crafts.

In short, the results point to a marked strengthening of cultural identity through the reactivation of ancestral knowledge, experimentation with local materials and direct community involvement. The sequence of actions implemented under the logic of Action-Research showed that native crafts, far from being a simple manual resource, can become a transformative educational axis. The students not only acquired artisanal skills, but also reconfigured their imaginaries about the value of their own, finding in tradition a space for creativity and reaffirmation of their roots.

#### 5. Discussion

The findings presented reflect the high pedagogical potential of native crafts to strengthen cultural identity and awaken the interest of students in the history and values of their region. In line with the postulates of Freire (2001) and González Varas (2000), direct experience with artisanal trades shows that students can reconstruct and resignify cultural heritage when they actively participate in processes of creation and reflection. The marked shift in the valuation of bulrushes, rushes, and totumos—from almost unknown materials to resources symbolically charged with meaning—corroborates the idea that the contextualization of content allows for a more solid appropriation of local identity (Ministry of National Education [MEN], 1998).

From the Research-Action approach (Fals Borda, 1999), the proposal was characterized by integrating the voice of master craftsmen and community participation, evidencing the relevance of a collaborative intervention. Throughout the sessions, it was observed how the presence of a local expert not only provided technical knowledge, but also facilitated the connection of the students with the Zenú indigenous legacy, reinforcing the bond between tradition and the school. This procedure is aligned with the approaches of Machacó López (2018), who underlines the relevance of local actors assuming a leading role in the educational process, legitimizing ancestral knowledge and contributing to the collective construction of meanings.

The motivation shown by the children during the phases of harvesting and transformation of vegetable fibers points to the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies based on experiential learning. In fact, the articulation of the collection of raw materials with the reflection on their origin and symbolism fits Halliday's (1979) perspective, in which language and culture merge in social practice, generating deeper and more significant learning. This approach was not limited to the mere teaching of manual techniques, but promoted a broader vision of craftsmanship as a possibility of entrepreneurship and a form of identity expression, consolidating the sense of belonging and cohesion of the group.

Another outstanding aspect is the reaffirmation of local identity through the rediscovery of the Zenú indigenous legacy. Before the intervention, most of the students showed a diffuse vision of their cultural

roots, restricted to generic features of the folkloric tradition. However, intergenerational dialogue with family members and artisans, together with manual practice, reinforced the relationship between past and present, so that history ceased to be a set of abstract data and was translated into personal experiences. These observations are in line with what Roncancio (1999) pointed out about the symbolic value of craftsmanship, understood not only as a utilitarian object, but as a cultural text that expresses shared meanings.

Regarding the economic dimension, the students' comments on the possible commercialization of their products suggest that crafts can be an axis of local development, motivating new generations to undertake initiatives that combine tradition with innovation. According to Linares, Galeano, and Figueroa (2008), a proposal of this type strengthens family economies and strengthens the social fabric, as long as the natural cycles of raw materials are respected and the community actively participates in decision-making.

The didactic sequence also revealed the need to continue strengthening these processes in the long term, since the acquisition of manual skills and cultural revaluation can be blurred if follow-up mechanisms are not established. This implies, as Vargas (2014) and Castaño (2010) point out, that educational institutions develop sustainable projects over time, incorporating crafts in different curricular spaces and facilitating the continuity of PAR. Likewise, the organization of fairs, exhibitions or exchanges with other schools could open additional opportunities for students to consolidate and disseminate what they have learned, strengthening the feeling of pride in their roots.

In short, experience indicates that native crafts transcend mere manual practice and stand as a training resource with great potential for transformation. By connecting the school with the collective memory and the indigenous heritage, it is encouraged that children not only acquire artisanal skills, but also recognize themselves as heirs of a legacy that remains valid in their daily practices. Under this approach, rural education is emerging as a scenario of convergence between the ancestral and the modern, promoting significant learning and promoting community cohesion for the preservation of a cultural heritage that belongs to present and future generations.

## **5. Conclusions**

The implementation of indigenous crafts as a pedagogical strategy in a rural context of Bajo Sinú demonstrated that learning transcends its merely instrumental dimension to become a process of strengthening cultural identity. By participating in the collection of plant fibers and the elaboration of products that link the Zenú indigenous heritage, the fifth-grade students not only developed manual skills and creativity, but also resignified the history and ancestral knowledge of their region. This rediscovery of tradition, supported by the Action-Research methodology, strengthened the link between school and community, enhancing co-responsibility in the conservation of a cultural heritage vulnerable to modernization and oblivion.

The findings reflect that, by articulating school theory with practical experience and intergenerational dialogue, children's motivation is boosted and their sense of belonging is consolidated. The change in perception of local fibers – from unknown or undervalued resources to identity elements with economic projections – shows the positive impact of contextualized teaching, based on the appropriation of collective memory. In addition, the initiative highlighted the importance of involving local artisans as training agents, who contribute not only their technical mastery, but also a historical and symbolic narrative that enriches the curriculum.

Experience confirms the relevance of long-term projects to ensure the sustainability of learning and the progressive increase of craft skills. It also underlines the need to promote exhibition or marketing spaces that make the work of students visible, stimulate entrepreneurship and promote the social appreciation of these traditional practices. Finally, it is concluded that the incorporation of crafts in rural education favors comprehensive learning, in which students strengthen their cultural identity and, at the same time, acquire skills and values that prepare them to face the challenges of contemporary life with a perspective rooted in the richness of their legacy.

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