



## Teaching in the Rainforest: Exploring Matses Children's Affective Engagement and Multisensory Experiences in the Classroom Environment

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on Matses children of Peruvian Amazonia and their experiences of formal schooling. Scholars working in Amazonia have emphasised the dysfunctional role of schools in Amerindian societies, suggesting that formal education is predicated upon parameters of learning that often contradict and challenge native understandings. This work, however, largely overlooked children's lived experience and affective encounters in the classroom, and this is the main focus of this paper. Starting from my own teaching activity in an Amazonian school, I discuss certain problems and failures of schooling with regard to children's perceptions and lived activities. I suggest that teaching in the field may provide valuable findings on how to enhance the pedagogical possibilities for formal learning and develop creative pedagogical methods. I argue that by recognising learning as a whole bodily and sensorial experience, and acknowledging the emotions of students and teachers, the pedagogical endeavour and results can be creatively enhanced. This does not only apply to schooling indigenous children in the field, but to teaching in general, including the teaching of anthropology in academic environments.

### Introduction: Indigenous Schooling and Children as Respondents

The anthropological literature concerned with indigenous people and schooling has often emphasised the clashes between native ways of learning and the requirements of school education. Authors have suggested that indigenous children are encouraged to learn through active participation and direct contribution to adults' activities (Lancy 2010, 2012a; Rogoff et al. 2003), which suggest native understandings of "learning through doing" (Willerslev 2007: 162). In school, however, indigenous children encounter radically different parameters of education, such as the obligation to sit in silent attention, attentive and submissive to the authoritarian ways of schoolteachers. These clashes often result in the children's inability to meet the requirements of school learning, which leads to educational failure, and at the same time prevents them from developing skills and types of knowledge established amongst previous generations (for instance Ohmagari and Berkes 1997; see also Lancy 2012b).<sup>1</sup>

Authors concerned with schooling in Amazonia have offered similar conclusions, emphasising that school education limits indigenous children in developing the lifestyle, skills and types of knowledge of older generations (see Rockwell and Gomes 2009). Harn, for instance, suggested that formal schooling has a disruptive impact on Shipibo children of Peru, since it "keeps them from learning their environment and own culture, [yet gives] them only minimal skills for life in town" (Hern 1992:36, cited in Lancy 2012b). Laura Rival has emphasised the crucial impact of formal schooling on the Huaorani of Ecuador, which has only recently been introduced to their society, and that is having an effect on processes of socioeconomic transformation for Huaorani people (1992, 1997, 2002). These include, amongst others, increasing sedentarisation, the opening to capitalistic economy and monetary exchange, and the shifting role of children from active food providers to "pupils" maintained by their parents (1992, 2002:152-176). But according to Rival, "the most far-reaching impact

[of formal schooling] has been the children's (...) deskillment with regard to forest knowledge' (1997:141). Formal education, therefore, would seem to prevent children from developing Amerindian skills, knowledge and practices.

Acknowledging these challenges, Amazonian indigenous organisations and the State have made an effort to promote bilingual policies of education and reformed curricula that would "teach the children their own culture" (e.g. Aikman 1997, 2002; Rival 1997). For instance, Aikman suggested that Harakmbut people of Peruvian Amazonia "want schooling to value and positively reinforce learning and knowledge about the Harakmbut way of life, and its beliefs and practices" (2002:45), and accordingly struggled to promote educational programmes that recognise their ways of life and teach them to the children (see also Aikman 1997, 1999). However, indigenous efforts to educate children to native lifestyle and practices often result in schooling programmes that promote a rather reified and essentialised view of "the indigenous culture." For instance programmes that portray to Amerindian children their grandfathers and ancestors as "uncivilised savages" (Rival 1997:138), without really encouraging the youth to develop the skills and knowledge of previous generations.

This work offers important insights onto the challenges posed by formal schooling in Amerindian societies. It tends, however, to address schooling from a macro-perspective that overlooks the classroom as a *lived* environment and dismisses the affective, emotional and multisensorial dimension of teaching and learning. Furthermore, these theories largely overlook children's own voices and lived experiences of schooling.<sup>2</sup> Amazonianists, and not just those concerned with schooling, have manifested little or no interest in seeing children as direct respondents of their research; which seems peculiar considering that young people constitute the majority of most Amazonia populations. They have instead addressed childhood from a rather detached and adult-centric perspective, showing no interest in asking direct questions to children, participating in their own activities, investigating their own lifestyle and practices, playing with them, and so forth.

I suggest that teaching in the field can prove a valuable research method to gain in-depth understandings on the failure of schooling among indigenous children. Teaching allows the researcher to look closely at classroom dynamics from a vantage point and as a direct participant rather than a detached observer. It helps obtaining better insights on the problems of formal education and the limits to children's possibilities of learning. The researcher can therefore offer new strategies to improve the pedagogical methods, so as to better stimulate children's participation while respecting indigenous ways of knowing.

The insights provided by teaching in the field can also be beneficial to the researcher who intends to teach in other environments, including teaching anthropology in academia. For instance, teaching indigenous children helped me reflect on my own life as a student as well as on my recent experiences as a Teaching Assistant in social anthropology within a British university. Having to confront a radically different teaching and learning style in Amazonia, I was pushed to consider how education could be improved not just for indigenous children in the field, but more generally within pedagogical work with both children and adults.

This paper draws from my teaching experience with Matses children in Peruvian Amazonia. I discuss how teaching in school afforded me an active role in the classroom, as opposed to simply participating as an outside observer, and allowed me to experience directly the problems of formal learning. I specifically suggest that if schools only provide children with basic skills such as reading, writing and doing maths, the educational project is largely a failure. In my own teaching activity, I seek to bring to life the affective, emotional and lived experiences of children and adults (including me) in the classroom environment. By so doing, I propose that explaining the failure of schooling in an Amazonian society has to start with children's affective encounters and multisensorial engagement (or lack of it) in the classroom. Central to this analysis is an attention to the physical dimension of schooling, including how children negotiate or refuse to adapt their bodily actions to the "body" of the classroom. In my own research, I place emphasis on children's agency in our interactions and exchanges. Children become central to such concerns.

The Matses are a native people living in Peruvian and Brazilian Amazonia and classified by scholars under the Panoan linguistic family (Fleck 2003; Romanoff 1984; Erikson 1994, 1999). They mainly rely on hunting, fishing, horticulture and wild food gathering, although manufactured goods and money exchanges are increasingly relevant.<sup>3</sup> My research took place in a village of approximately two hundred inhabitants, at least sixty of whom are under eighteen years of age. Here, I carried out fourteen months of fieldwork (twelve months in 2010 and two additional months in 2012) working extensively with children aged six to thirteen, both in and outside school.<sup>4</sup>

In order to introduce Matses children and their experiences in school, I will start with an ethnographic vignette that illustrates my first day of teaching. The episode took place in March, at the beginning of the school year and after my two initial months of fieldwork in the village.

### **The First Day of Teaching in a Matses School**

*Inés, come down!!! Children, sit back on your chairs!!! Matias, stop it!!!* I yell at them, but the children ignore me altogether. They are laughing, screaming out loud, moving frantically and, apparently, having a great time. I tell them (quietly, then more loudly, and eventually yelling) to return to their seats and quieten it down. My knowledge of Matses is not very good yet, so I yell at the children in a mix of Matses and Spanish. But the children speak no Spanish and they just keep smiling at me while I tell them off. At this moment—after barely one hour of drawing peacefully at their desks, on my very first attempt of teaching in school—the children are climbing up a mass of cement sacks heaped up next to the classroom wall, trying to reach the classroom's window to escape from it.

Inés, a seven-year-old girl, is one of the first children to reach the peak of the concrete-sacks mountain, overtaking the boys, with a naughty grin on her face. Matias, a seven-year-old boy, crawls up behind her and does not even look at me when I ask him to go back to his seat. The classroom is out of control and, clearly, I have no power to restore order. The schoolteacher left me here, asking me to 'make the children draw', and trusting me to keep them quiet and at task. I feel confused and lost, unable to undertake the role of authoritarian educator.

In the past few days (classes in the village have only started a week ago) I have seen the children in school with their regular teacher and I was struck by how extraordinarily well behaved, quiet, disciplined and obedient they looked. But now, in the turmoil of the classroom, I realise that in my presence the children are behaving with the same verve, dynamism and energy that they manifest when playing outside the school: screaming, running, jumping, moving and talking restlessly.

The situation changes drastically when Julio, a Matses man in his sixties, enters the classroom. Julio is one of the best hunters in the village. He can barely speak or understand Spanish, but I visit his house often, since I am familiar with his teenage daughters. Julio, probably attracted by the joyful shouting coming from the classroom, walks in and stares at the children. As soon as they notice him, the children shut up and stand still. Julio starts haranguing them in an aggressive tone, pointing his finger at them and yelling in a fast and vigorous manner. I understand that he is threatening the children with frog poison, an intoxicating secretion taken from a frog's skin that Matses people apply ritually onto their bodies. The poison application has a powerful cleansing effect, inducing the receiver to nausea, a pounding headache, vomit and diarrhoea. Matses elders occasionally force children to receive the poison, which as I experienced myself is a painful and frightening experience, and young Matses are terrified by the threat of it.

The classroom has turned silent at Julio's threats. The children stand speechless, lowering their heads down and avoiding eye contact with Julio. Inés has dropped her naughty grin and now keeps her mouth shut. One by one the children descend the cement sacks and return to their desks. Matias, who is Julio's grandchild, looks intimidated and quickly sits back on his chair. I thank Julio, who nods to me muttering something in Matses and leaves the classroom. The children and I carry on drawing for a little while, until I let them free and they run out, shouting and laughing again.

The vignette illustrates my first day of teaching in a Matses village, Peruvian Amazonia (all personal names of children and adults have been changed to protect their privacy). Schools are relatively new in Matses society: the first ones were introduced in 1969 by missionaries of the SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics), when Matses people started abandoning their itinerant lifestyle in the forest and settling down in permanent villages (missionary education in Peru is discussed by Stoll 1982, cited in Trapnell 2003). Schools are currently established in every Matses village, State-run and following the national curriculum of education (Fleck 2003:35; on State policies of bilingual and Indigenous education in Peruvian Amazonia, see Gasché 1997 and Trapnell 2003). Classes are run from March to December approximately, with a break in July. Schoolteachers are native Matses trained in Iquitos, the capital city of Loreto department, and they teach almost exclusively in Matses language, with the wide majority of Matses people being monolingual.

I arrived in the field in January 2010 and started teaching in March, when the school year began, and I carried on for a few months throughout fieldwork. I was given permission to work by the village Chief, a Matses man in his

early forties who works as the primary school teacher.<sup>5</sup> The Chief and I agreed I could work with his students, a group of approximately sixteen children aged between six and ten, as *profesora de dibujo*, ‘art teacher’. This was facilitated by the plethora of materials I had brought with me: felt-tip pens, coloured pencils, rubbers, paper sheets, notebooks, crêpe paper, and more, which I gave out and used in addition to digital cameras and sound-recorders, carrying out filming and photographic projects with the children. Schoolteachers tend only to distribute a few notebooks and stationeries. The teaching activities I developed attracted older children from different classes and stimulated interest.

The classroom revealed a great research environment, where I could gather all my young respondents together in a bounded space and use creative methodologies such as drawing, group interviews, sound recording, filming and so forth. Working in school helped me to establish a close relationship with the children, to explore their lifeworlds and understandings, and it offered the children unique and amusing opportunities to use materials and carry out projects (such as using digital cameras) that they have no regular access to. Trying to keep pupils quiet, however, was always a struggle for me, from my very first day of teaching recounted in the vignette above. According to Matses parents, school is fundamental because it provides children with basic skills—such as reading, writing and doing maths—that will help them to deal with the *chotac*, non-Indian people, and do business with them. If the children cannot read or count, non-Indian people will cheat and take advantage of them. For instance Andres, a thirty-two-year-old father of four, once told me: “if my son will sell plantains to the *chotac* [non-Indians] he must know how much they weigh. If he doesn’t know that this sack of plantains weighs two kilos, the *chotac* will tell him: *this is one kilo!* and give him less money for it. Or if the *chotac* cheat and under-pay him, my son will not realise, if he doesn’t know how to count money”.

This suggests the growing importance of non-Indian types of materials and practices in Matses life and the awareness that dealing with the non-Indian world requires skills that can only be learned in school. The same point has often been made with regard to the reasons why Amazonian peoples perceive schooling as necessary (see Rockwell and Gomes 2009, Aikman 2002). According to Aikman, the Harakmbut of Peru “want formal education because they believe it offers a means of acquiring knowledge and skills from the wider society” and of accessing “what they see as the benefits accruing to the migrants and colonists living around them: access to clean drinking water, participation in the market economy” (2002:45).

When I asked them why they go to school, Matses children often replied *anquiadshun*, “to learn,” adding that their parents tell them to go. Schooling seemed to be perceived as a fundamental part of a child’s duties. I could nonetheless notice that Matses children often do *not* go to school and play in the river instead. And even when going to classes, the wide majority of Matses children did not seem to develop the skills they were expected to acquire with regards to the formal curriculum. During teaching, I would notice that, although students advance in different ways, some children who are ten or eleven years old could still barely write and read, let alone solve mathematics calculations. If the perceived aim of schooling is developing skills such as maths, writing and reading, this aim is very badly accomplished. The educational project is, therefore, largely dysfunctional and ineffective.

In the rest of the paper I provide an explanation by looking closely at children’s affective encounters with the classroom. I suggest that teaching in school helped me to look closely at the reasons of educational failure, while also inspiring me to consider some possible pedagogical strategies to deal with such a failure in the future. My role as a teacher also helped me establish a close relationship with my respondents and share their lived experiences in school. Teaching therefore became an ethically grounded as well as a “theoretically valid and practically advantageous” method of research (Kellett 2009 quoted in Hoefinger, this volume).

## “Fear” and “Laughing” as Affective Engagement in the Classroom



Image 1 The children are sitting down and facing the teacher's desk. Their bodily positions and the actions captured by the image suggest that school can be boring (*chieshe*): some girls on the left are getting distracted, a boy in the second row is looking elsewhere and a girl in the front is yawning and turning backwards. [Copyright image courtesy of James Vybiral]



Image 2 The children and I are singing the English song “Head shoulders knees and toes”. When I was teaching, I encouraged the children to inhabit the classroom environment in a different way: climbing up the desks, sitting on them, moving around and so forth. Activities that involve the whole body in movement seemed to stimulate the children better and grasp their attention. The image shows how I shared the children's playing-and-laughing-mood with them, often having an amusing time in the classroom and outside. [Copyright image courtesy of James Vybiral]

The vignette reported in the previous section, from my first day of teaching, suggests the chaotic atmosphere that dominated my classes. By the time I began teaching, in March, I had already started familiarising with children outside school. I had noticed that Matses children are in general extremely dynamic, energetic and lively outside the classroom. The children spend most of their time together and away from adults' supervision and control (a similar case is suggested for Huaorani children by Rival 1993:640), where they enjoy performing



physically challenging and highly dynamic activities. They take great pleasure in running around, climbing up trees, swimming in the river, wrestling, chasing each other, and so forth.

The children also enjoy being mischievous. As Matses adults and the children themselves admit, children are *cuididi*, literally “naughty” or “mischievous trouble makers” (Spanish *traviesos*). Being *cuididi* primarily means misbehaving, disobeying the commands of adults, and performing naughty actions such as mistreating a younger sibling, playing with food, cluttering up the house, and so forth. It is very frequent to hear an adult yelling to a child *cuididiquenda*, which means “stop being naughty” or “stop disobeying.” Matses people say that being mischievous and trying to cause troubles is children’s *padibi*, a Matses word that can be translated as “character,” “disposition,” “nature,” “tendency” or “way of being.”

When I was teaching, the children kept enacting their mischievous dispositions, *padibi*, and the hyper-dynamic ways of acting that they manifest outside school. Instead of sitting quietly and carrying out the tasks I assigned, the children would never stop moving, jumping around, shouting, climbing up their desks, laughing loud and being mischievous to me and to each other. They stole coloured pencils from one another, older children mistreated younger ones, boys and girls insulted each other, and boys engaged in wrestling actions. The noise in my classes was so loud that, when I was in school, everybody in the village could hear the children at a distance and guess I was replacing the teacher.

When the Chief was teaching, however, the children’s ways of acting changed radically. They engaged in different bodily postures, facial expressions and oral interactions. Their bodies seemed to shrink, they sat down quietly and did not move frantically, shout or laugh loudly. If addressed by the teacher a child would reply in a soft voice, lowering the head down and avoiding eye contact with him. The Chief assured me that, in his classes, children never cry and rarely attempt rowdy gestures.

With the Chief in the classroom, the children have to negotiate their usual tendency, *padibi*, to act mischievously. This implies adjusting their possibilities of action, bodily postures and movements to a certain type of material environment. Their small desks and chairs require a certain way of positioning the body, which constrains the movement and encourage stillness, while pushing the children to face, hence pay attention to, the teacher: as it is shown in the photograph above (image 1).

The children’s different bodily behaviours with me compared to the Chief suggest different types of affective encounters with the classroom environment, which I address as multisensorial and whole bodily experiences of feeling. The children confessed to me that they are “scared of” their teacher, *dacuëden*. The Matses verb *dacuëden* could be translated as being “scared of” or “shy with,” indicating feelings of fear, terror, embarrassment, shyness or a mixture of all. Hunters may *dacuëden* jaguars, as in “be scared of.” A young man can *dacuëden* a woman he fancies, as in “be shy with.” And children, as they openly admit, *dacuëden* schoolteachers, which indicates a mixture of intimidation, shyness and fear. These feelings of fear and shyness denote most of the children’s affective encounters with the classroom, and they become manifest in the absence of noise, the children’s contained bodily postures, the heads facing down, the eyes avoiding the teacher’s look, and the hesitation in movements and gestures.

When I was teaching, instead, the classroom turned into a playground. The children kept shouting and jumping around, throwing pencils in the air, climbing on their desks, wrestling and hitting each other. As my Matses language skills started improving, I could manage to better explain my tasks and stimulate children’s participation. This, however, did not stop the children from acting mischievously. My attempts to keep the classroom quiet, which varied from gentle warnings to yelling, were futile. The children ignored my scolding and could never sit down or concentrate on the tasks I assigned for too long, and on two occasions I had to deal with children crying after a quarrel with a peer.

I sometimes asked the children why they were not scared of me like they are of the Chief. They usually laughed and replied: *mibi bëdambo icque*, “because you are good.” On one occasion, I asked Sheila, Julio’s sixteen-year-old daughter, why the children were not shy around me or frightened by my threats. I pointed out to Sheila that I am still an adult and children are usually intimidated when adults yell or threaten them. When I asked this question, Sheila and I were in a small house that Matses people had built for me in my latest part of fieldwork, together with a crowd of young children. Some of the children were drawing on the floor, which was covered in pieces of paper, and throwing colour pencils at each other; others were running around, laughing and shouting; and a few children were climbing up the wall to walk on the ceiling’s wooden beams, in spite of my warnings to come down. Sheila looked around and replied, pointing at the children: “*mibi mamëshunane?*”, literally “because you

make them play/laugh” or “because you play/laugh with them” (the Matses verb *mamëñec* can be translated as both “to play” and “to laugh”).

Sheila’s answer put into words the mood that characterised most of my encounters with the children: cheerful, recreational, fun, amusing. While in the morning I was teaching, outside school I engaged in the children’s own activities in the peer-group and shared their loud and dynamic ways of interacting. I played in the river with them, engaged in pretence-fight games, chatted with the children, engaged in verbal confrontations, and so forth. These activities were made more amusing by the goods I had brought from outside, of which children had little or no experience prior to my arrival: cameras, water guns, inflatable toys to play in the water, crêpe paper, drawing material, marbles, and more. The time I spent with the children was mostly based on playing and laughing, *mamëñec*, like Sheila pointed out, whereby I gradually became familiar with children’s everyday lifeworlds and shared activities far beyond the access allowed to adults.

By encountering and playing every day outside school, the children and I developed an affective relationship that extended into the classroom space. The children felt free to engage in verbal confrontations with me, ignore my commands and participate in the tasks I assigned as they pleased. With time, the children started referring to me with the Spanish term *amiga*, “friend,” whereas I referred to them as “my kids,” *cum bacuëbo*. The term *amigo/a*, “friend,” one of the few Spanish words that children know, finds no literal translation in Matses language. Every Matses person could potentially address any other by a kinship term and Matses children have often told me that they “have no friends” (*cum amigo nidbëdec*). Young Matses are aware that non-Indians spend time with people they are not related to and call them “friends,” and they are very fascinated by this concept. My presence, being a non-Indian myself, always stimulated many questions about friendship and children often asked about my friends, if I have any, what they are like, what we do together, and so forth. By calling me *amiga*, the children found a place for me in their lifeworld and a way to address my role as something in between a regular adult and a playing companion.

In the classroom, our mutual familiarity allowed the children for certain types of sensorial experience, highly characterised by a “playing and laughing” mood of engagement. This is suggested by the second photograph (Image 2 above) in which the children and I are singing the English song “*Head shoulders knees and toes*.” Our relationship evolved in such a way that towards the end of fieldwork I decided to stop teaching, since holding—or trying to hold—an authoritarian role did not make any sense to me.

Matses adults, including the Chief, do not spend time with children in the same way, participating in peer group activities or playing with them. Adults often asked what I found so interesting in children and why would I want to spend time with them—not in a concerned or protective manner, but simply puzzled by my unusual interest. By saying that “I am good,” *bëdambo*, and calling me a “friend,” *amiga*, the children themselves pointed out at my strange “way of being,” *padibi*, something between a playing companion and a regular adult.

The Chief is not addressed as a “friend”, *amigo*, but as an authoritarian adult who stimulates different feelings in his pupils. The children admit that school is *chieshe*, boring, and they fear the teacher, *dacuëden*. These feelings, as Matses children admit, are rooted in the body and made manifest through bodily movement; for instance, the children’s their stooped posture and tendency to sit still and quiet are art of the experience of fear and shyness, *dacuëden*. Matses children described this to me as an uncomfortable bodily experience that can involve blushing, a sense of hotness in chest and neck and the inability of moving or reacting in any way (termed in Matses as being *natie*, “unable to do anything”). In school the children also tend to yawn, stretch their arms, look around and get distracted, which suggest that children find schooling *chieshe*, boring, and are not keen in participating. As a matter of fact, most children regularly skip classes and play in the river, which is far more amusing.

The children’s affective encounters in the classroom with me vis-à-vis the Chief, however, are not given but continuously negotiated and ongoing. The children’s moods, I argue, can only be understood in relation to the material environment of the classroom, the situated uses that children and teachers can make of it and the materials used by teachers, which encourage children to different types of emotional engagement. For instance, when I was teaching, the children used the material space of the classroom creatively, climbing on their desks and running around. Their playing-and-laughing mood was allowed by our familiarity as playing companions outside school, but also stimulated by the plethora of materials I let them use: digital cameras, recorders, all sorts of stationeries, and so forth. In order to keep the children interested and enthusiastic in the classroom, I made continuous use of such materials and tried out different uses for them.<sup>6</sup>

The Chief also uses certain types of tools to stimulate fear and shyness, as he himself admits. These feelings are not given, but must be continuously brought to life and made anew by the schoolteacher through action so as to encourage the children to sit still and quiet. Therefore, the Chief resorts to verbal threats, mild forms of physical punishments and frog poison as useful tools to negotiate children's tendencies to be "naughty," *cuididi*, when he is teaching.

It is clear from these examples that different pedagogical styles encourage different states of being in the students, who are stimulated to learn in contrasting ways. These pedagogical strategies feed into different types of emotional engagement with the classroom, whereby the children feel encouraged or not to participate in school activities. While teaching in the field, I therefore started considering how the process of learning in school could be enhanced through creative teaching techniques. The teaching style should be revised so as to stimulate children's engagement while also helping them to develop the skills provided by formal education.

### Threats, Physical Punishment and Frog Poison: the Teacher's Tools

Schoolteachers regularly threaten or, as I discovered later in my fieldwork, occasionally punish the children so as to maintain the classroom quiet. For instance, when the children look distracted, misbehave and ignore his commands, the Chief will shout and threaten to hit them or call in an elder who will force them to receive frog poison. The children's reaction to threats is generally immediate: especially when the teacher mentions frog poison, the children quieten down and behave. Julio gave a demonstration of this on my first day of teaching: by mentioning frog poison he pushed the children to readjust their ways of being, quieten down, stand still and finally return to sit at their desks.

Matses adults consider threats and physical punishment, especially the enforcement to receive frog poison, as ethical and even necessary to deal with children's *padibi* (disposition) to be *cuididi* (naughty). One of the first Matses expressions I learned, which is frequently yelled by adults to children on a daily basis, is *mibi cuesembi*: "I will beat you up", that is, "stop misbehaving or I will hit you." The phrase is generally used to scold children who are being mischievous and disobedient, *cuididi*, including by schoolteachers in the classroom. Matses parents openly approve of this: if the schoolteacher threatens his students, adults blame the children for being naughty and justify not only the teacher's threats. For instance Ramiro, a man in his early forties and father of three children, told me that when students are being naughty teachers should yell at them and regularly force them to take the poison. As I described above, the application of frog poison is painful and frightening, but Matses people say that it makes the body stronger, eliminates laziness and stimulates physical dynamism and the will to work hard. Ramiro is very critical, like all Matses adults, of children who misbehave and are lazy, *chiesbe*, and he emphasises the importance of frog poison to make children grow strong and willing to work hard.

Noticing that I was unable to control the children in school, Matses adults openly encouraged me to threaten and even hit my mischievous students. The Chief encouraged me to yell at the children *mibi cuesembi*, "I will beat you up": "otherwise—he said—they will never listen to you." After some initial concerns and reticence I eventually surrendered and, worn out by the children's wild ways in the classroom, I decided to try out threats. My first attempt to intimidate the children took place on a very hot morning, when the children were being louder than usual and the heat adding to the noise made teaching impossible. Exhausted, I yelled out: "*bacuebo, mibi cuesembi*" ("kids, I'll will beat you up"). The classroom turned silent. The children stopped moving and shouting, and they all looked at me, puzzled. After an instant, however, they burst out laughing and returned to their rowdy activities.

A few older boys—who were attracted by my materials and creative methods such as drawing, taking photographs, or painting—joined my classes and made them particularly chaotic. Ezequiel, thirteen years old, was particularly tough to deal with. Renown in the village for being a "great troublemaker," *cuididimbo*, Ezequiel is praised and highly regarded by all other boys and everybody in the peer group seeks his company. In the classroom, at least when I was teaching, he constantly engaged in shouting, bantering, running around and trying to cause trouble.

On one occasion, while the other students were drawing, but also being loud and moving around, Ezequiel joined the classroom and started trying to annoy me. I was standing at the teacher's desk, collecting and tidying up the children's drawings. Ezequiel stood in front of me, holding his head high in an upright and confident posture, as usual. "I am not scared of you, Camilla." he kept saying in a confrontational mood "I am *cuididi*,



mischievous. I'm not scared of you." I warned him to stop, threatened to call the teacher, and yelled at him *mibi cuesembi*, "I will beat you up." Since none of this had any effect on him, I eventually started ignoring his words and kept ordering my drawings. Since he was facing me and turning his back to the classroom entrance, Ezequiel did not notice that the Chief had entered the classroom and was walking towards us, silently. Hearing his provocations, the Chief frowned and yelled at him, "Ezequiel, what are you saying?" The boy jumped on his feet and turned over, facing the Chief. His posture changed drastically: he shrunk the shoulders, shut up and became paralysed with fright/shyness (*dacnäden*). For a few moments he hesitated in front of the Chief, who was standing in between him and the door, then ran away to the side and left the school running. The Chief pulled a big smile and greeted me as usual.

The children seemed truly frightened at the Chief's threats, but took mine as a joke. Noticing this, Matses parents explained that children were "not scared of me" (*mibi dacnedenenquio*) and encouraged me to hit them so as to prove my real intentions. Damita, twenty-three years old and mother of four children, advised me to slap my students so as to prove that my threats were serious. At my bemused reaction, Damita replied "not too hard," and hit gently the back of my head to give a demonstration of an appropriate slap.

Ramona, a woman in her thirties with five children, showed to me the spiky leaf of a stinging-nettle plant, *chushante*, which induces a dreadful itch if touched. Adults, especially elderly people, threaten misbehaving children with this type of leaf and occasionally hit them with it. Ramona placed a tiny piece of the leaf on my finger to prove how painful it feels, and she recommended taking the leaf to school to threaten, but also occasionally hit the children with it, even if not too hard.

Schoolteachers and adults in general have to use threats and occasionally physical punishment, such as pulling the children's ears or force them to receive frog poison, so as to re-establish their authority. The children tend to act mischievously (*aton padibi nec*, "it is their way of being") and push the boundaries of accepted behaviour; then, the adults restate their control through action. The Chief made this clear by recounting an episode happened shortly before my arrival in the field.

For a few days in a row the children had been lazy, *chieshe*, not bringing to school the homework he assigned. The Chief warned the children that he would call Julio and asked him to put frog poison onto them. "The children didn't believe me," said the Chief, "they thought I wouldn't have *really* called Julio and so they kept being lazy." A few days later, however, Julio did show up at the classroom door. He walked into the classroom holding a burning stick in one hand and frog poison in the other. The children were petrified, as the Chief recounted to me, laughing his head off. "Who is being lazy?" asked Julio. "Everyone," replied the Chief. One by one, Julio took the students by the arm and applied poison onto their skin. The Chief stood at the door, making sure that no child could escape. Soon all the children, the youngest ones being six years old, were feeling dizzy and nauseous. The Chief let them out, so that they could vomit outside. A few of them even passed out for a while. In the days following this episode, said the Chief, all his students brought their homework to class.

This episode was recounted to me several times by children and adults: children told me that they felt very scared when this happened, whereas the adults recounted this event laughing, especially the Chief; which confirms how Matses adults approve of threatening and punishing children, as they encouraged me to do.

This authoritarian and "physical" way of treating children, I argue, seems to make sense in Matses everyday life and dwelling environments outside school, where people are required to develop physical strength and dynamism in order to survive. Matses parents encourage children from a young age to carry out household activities such as fishing, collecting water, chopping wood, and so forth, through yelling and in a 'tough' authoritarian manner. By so doing, they encourage children to develop the bodily dynamism and will to work hard, perceived as key to survival in Matses society. However, in my view, when such an authoritarian type of teaching is applied in school, for instance by the Chief, the results are very different and not as successful, as I will discuss in the next section.

## Learning through the Body and Refusing Participation

Having revealed the interactions of children in school and their emotional encounters with the classroom, I suggest why the schooling is largely ineffective, meaning that children do not learn the basic skills they are

expected to develop in the classroom. As I hinted at, this largely depends on the children's types of emotional engagement in the classroom environment and their subsequent refusal to participate in school.

When children are being lazy or refusing to help their parents with garden work, taking care of a younger sibling, chopping up wood (a boy's task), or washing plates (a girl's task), their parents will most likely yell and threaten them with physical punishment. By so doing, the children learn to be active, work hard and help in household tasks. Forcing children to receive frog poison, as adults occasionally do, is an emblematic form of physical action with pedagogical intents. If a child is being lazy, by forcing him or her to receive frog poison the adults stimulate the child's will to work hard and remove laziness, as Matses people openly state: acting onto the child's body stimulates a process of transformation and learning.

Mild forms of physical punishment and threats are locally understood as constructive actions that stimulate children's learning and facilitate their becoming full practitioners in society (see Lancy 2012c). They are part of an authoritarian teaching style that adults frequently adopt with children: parents often yell at their children, tell them off and threaten to hit them. Adults admit that asserting such an authoritarian and severe stance is the only way for the children to obey and carry out their duties, such as helping with household tasks. They also imply that authority is beneficial in school, as it is the only way to push the children to be diligent and respect the teacher.

In the classroom, however, as my observations show, the authoritarian teaching style largely discourages the children's participation. It furthermore restrains movement and dynamism, which children develop a taste for outside school. I suggest that Matses children—who are active and moving all day in the nearby forest, the river and the garden—develop a taste for physically challenging action. Their favourite activities are, amongst others: swimming in the river against the current; climbing up trees, and reaching high spots very rapidly; running; diving down from high tree branches into the river water; chasing each other under the water; venturing through the woods around the houses; and so forth. These recreational activities allow for moments of emotional intensity and are highly rewarding for the senses, thereby stimulating children's affective engagement with the environment.

The severe ways of teachers in school aim precisely at restraining bodily movement and dynamism, while promoting quietness and stillness. This makes the classroom not as sensorially rewarding as other daily environments, such as the river. The children "fear" the teacher, *dacuñden*, and therefore obey to his commands of sitting down in silence, with their legs trapped under the small desk, forced to face the teacher, and unable to turn around for fear of being yelled at. These bodily postures and (im)possibilities of action are extremely unsatisfying and tedious: school is "boring," *chieshe*, as the children often told me.

Schoolteachers themselves, who are native Matses, do not enjoy schooling. When I was in the field, the Chief often refused to give classes and did something else, such as fixing his house, and he was always happy whenever I offered to replace him in school. Being a Matses person, the Chief himself is much more stimulated by physically challenging activities and prefers manual tasks to sitting in a classroom for several hours. Indeed, what the children and the Chief enjoy the most during school hours is weeding the big area in front of the school with their machetes. If children often skip classes, they very much enjoy weeding and everyone participates in it. This activity involves the whole body in movement, therefore stimulates children's participation much better than sitting in school.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the affective and sensorial qualities of Matses children's experiences in the classroom environment. I have shown that teaching in the field can prove a valuable research method (see also the other papers in this volume) that allows establishing close relationships with the research participants and sharing in the processes of learning. My experience of teaching allowed me to understand classroom dynamics in a way that would not have been possible by simply participating in school as a guest or an observer.

I described how, when I was teaching as a play companion or an *amiga* (friend), the children felt free to act as they pleased and mainly encountered the classroom through playing and laughing, *mamëñec*. My lack of "authority" and my refusal to put threats into practice by hitting the children made it impossible to keep the students quiet, while the tools and creative activities that I applied stimulated children's enthusiasm and playing

mood. Therefore, the classroom turned into a playground rather than an arena for the locally “standardised” ways of learning the school curriculum.

When the Chief was teaching, he was able to push the children to sit still and quiet by using a different set of tools, namely verbal threats, physical punishment and frog poison. This highly authoritarian pedagogical method kept the classroom silent, but, as adults admitted, it did so by evoking feelings of fear, shyness and insecurity. It also restricted children’s possibilities for movement and stimulated feelings of boredom. Those experiences contrasted with children’s tendency (*padibi*) to engage in highly dynamic and physical activities. Accordingly, that teaching style discouraged the children’s participation and, in my view, it resulted in educational failure.

Authors concerned with the challenges of schooling in native Amazonia, who suggest that State programmes of education do not respect indigenous lifestyle and practices, have argued for the need of new curricula and bilingual programmes of education that will respect Amerindian knowledge and ways of life. As these authors suggest, indigenous people should have a key role in rethinking the curriculum so as to promote strategies of self-development and to decide for their own futures (see in particular Gasché 2004).

Such work, however, overlooks learning as a highly embodied activity that unfolds through sensorial and bodily engagement, as anthropological discussions on cognition and knowing have emphasised (e.g. Lave and Wegner 1991, Toren 1990, Ingold 2001, Marchand 2010, Herzfeld 2007, Spencer 2010, 2011). I would argue that if Matses children are to learn the skills provided by formal education while developing their own ways of knowing, the whole teaching style, and not just the taught curriculum, should undergo a radical reformation. This means recognising the importance of bodily action and sensorial engagement in learning; especially considering the emphasis that Matses people place onto the body and the satisfaction that children take in extreme movement and hyper dynamic actions. The whole body of the school, intended as the material space of the classroom, should be transformed or used creatively so as to allow children’s movement and dynamism. By so doing, the children could be better stimulated and encouraged to participate in the educational project, and a solution to the dysfunctional and largely unsatisfactory results of formal education may be found without challenging Matses ways of knowing and relating to the world.

My experience of teaching in the field therefore provided me with in-depth understandings of how the pedagogical style should be revised in order to encourage learning. As I have shown, this means, first of all, taking into serious account how teaching and learning unfold through sensorial modalities. Spencer (2011) reminds us that the emotions of teachers and learners, including those of the researcher in the field, play a great role in the educational process and should not be dismissed. Arguing for a view of knowing as embodied and situated, Spencer specifically suggests that anthropologists should develop “emotional reflexivity in order to achieve transformative learning” (2011: 69). I argue accordingly that by recognising how students and teachers *feel* in the classroom, the pedagogical style could be reformed. This would imply, for instance, including much wider bodily action and using the classroom space creatively so as to invite children’s participation. In this sense, the experience of teaching helped me consider some ways in which teaching *with* indigenous children can be improved in the future.

This, however, is not just confined to schooling amongst indigenous children or to teaching in the field. Bodily emotions and engagement are recognised as part of human processes of learning, and not just as an expression of childhood or specifically indigenous societies. Embodied affects are therefore part of the educational dynamics in general (e.g. Schutz and Pekrun 2007, Boler 1999), including teaching anthropology “back home” (e.g. Heaton-Shrestha 2010, Spencer 2010, 2011). My experience of teaching with the Matses led me to reflect upon my own activities as a student and a Teaching Assistant in social anthropology. I started considering that teaching could be improved if the bodily and affective engagement of students and teachers are taken into account. Although I have not yet elaborated such creative methodologies, this possibility has opened a path towards future explorations. Teaching in the field therefore becomes a way of learning that can be beneficial to the research respondents as well as enhancing anthropological research in the field of education as well as teaching anthropology.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A similar point has been made by authors concerned with working class children and formal education, who suggested that schooling contradicts the ways of learning and being of working-class children outside the classroom (for instance Willis 1978; Evans 2006). In this paper, however, I will mainly consider ethnographic literature concerning Amazonian schooling. This literature, I argue, has rarely or never addressed children as direct research respondents, which was the main objective of my research.

<sup>2</sup> In a recent issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, edited by Rockwell and Gomes (2009), a few authors have proposed a different approach to schooling in Amerindian societies, one that addresses the classroom as a site of fieldwork and takes into serious consideration indigenous perspectives. However, children's lived encounters and emotional experiences in school are only partially explored.

<sup>3</sup> Here I only address Peruvian Matses. The major ethnographic sources on Matses people, which are not abundant, are offered by: Romanoff's work based on his fieldwork in the mid-1970s (1976, 1983, 1984); Matlock (2002); Fleck (2001, 2002, 2003, 2007); Erikson (1994, 1999); Romanoff, Fleck et al. (2004); and Kovasna (2009).

<sup>4</sup> The village is fairly remote from Peruvian major cities. In order to reach it from Lima, the capital of Peru, one needs to fly to Iquitos, a capital city in the Amazonian region, and fly from there to Colonia Angamos, a major hub deeper in the rainforest. Flights to Colonia Angamos should take place twice a week, but in the rainy season flights are scheduled according to the weather and, in case of strong raining, there can be no flights for several days, even weeks. From Colonia Angamos, the village can be reached via river, travelling on a motorised canoe for eight to twelve hours, according to the level of water.

<sup>5</sup> There are two primary-school teachers in the village: the Chief, who teaches children from first to third grade, aged between six and ten; and the Chief's wife, who teaches children from fourth to sixth grade, aged between nine and fourteen. Classes are heterogeneous in terms of age because many children do not attend classes regularly and have to repeat school years. The students are divided into two big groups: the Chief teaches in the morning, whereas his wife teaches in the afternoon.

<sup>6</sup> The projects I carried out in school and their outcomes constitute an important part of the ethnographic material I used in my PhD thesis.