

Educational Performance in Ecuador's Chota Valley: The Specter of Institutional Racism

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Abstract:

This contribution examines the inadequate and abnormal performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," a public primary school located in Ecuador's predominantly black Chota Valley. The eight white teachers who work at this school conduct themselves in a manner that is so unprofessional that their motives are called into question – are these (white) teachers truly dedicated to providing their (black) students with an adequate education? The teachers' unmotivated and inadequate performance, their failure to include cultural education in the school curricula, the racist misinformation found in the textbooks used at the school, and the suspicion that the national education ministry intentionally sends the worst teachers to black communities all suggest that the school's performance may be poor by design.

Introduction

Negros (people of predominantly African heritage), *mulatos* (people of mixed African and European heritage), and *zambos* (people of mixed African and indigenous heritage) make up approximately six percent of Ecuador's population. This black² population is largely concentrated in two small regions, the coastal Esmeraldas Province and the northern highlands' Chota Valley. Because Ecuador's indigenous population is regarded as the "officially recognized sufferer from oppression... there is no desire to add another group to this category, or to delve into the issue of African cultural contributions" (Rout 1976:282). Ecuador's black communities, like their counterparts in other Latin American countries with large indigenous populations, routinely see their problems ignored by government agencies, private organizations, and international observers alike.

The documented history of the Chota Valley exists almost exclusively as the history of the dominant outsider. That information which is available about the ancestors of the region's present population, dating back to the slaves who were first brought to the Chota Valley in the late sixteenth century, focuses not on the actions taken by these people, but rather on how they were treated by their masters and by the laws of the land. Their customs and their beliefs, their triumphs and their tragedies, their leaders and their heroes, the stories of all the individual men and women who contributed to the formation of the unique African-American culture that still clings to the banks of the Chota-Mira River remain anonymous. Their actions and their voices

silenced by historical neglect, the generations of black slaves whose labor transformed the Chota Valley appear in the annals of history "as a hidden social actor... as though they were found without dreams or hopes, passive and without plans" (Coronel Feijoo 1991:131).

Similarly, there also exists little if any documentation of the historical development of the region's cultural traditions. The most instantly identifiable manifestation of the Chota Valley's unique culture is the *bomba*. This musical form and the dance that accompanies it (also called the *bomba*), both unique to the region, blend together various Spanish, Andean, and African influences. One man from Chalguyacu, a village located at the eastern end of the Chota Valley, told me that the *bomba* provides the region's residents with "a reminder that we are from Africa." Other cultural manifestations – including the rhythms of the *banda mocha*, the various local legends that are passed from generation to generation, and the well-known couplets that also form part of the region's oral tradition – also highlight the region's uniqueness. The black residents of the Chota Valley, while also proudly Ecuadorian, take immense pride in their local communities and their unique heritage.

Through a program organized by the University of Minnesota and the Fundación CIMAS del Ecuador, I spent six months living in Mascarilla, a small agricultural village located at the center of the Chota Valley. During this time I worked as an English teacher at the local primary school, the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." As is true in most of the Chota

Valley's thirty-seven small communities, the vast majority of Mascarilla's 850 residents are black. Yet, while roughly eighty-five percent of the approximately 165 students who attend *escuela* in Mascarilla are black, there is only one black adult present at the school on a daily basis, and her job is to keep the classrooms and the school grounds tidy. The eight teachers who work full-time at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" all commute to the school each morning from Ibarra (population 120,000). All eight teachers are white, as are the two teachers who work at Mascarilla's kindergarten and the physical education instructor who commutes to Mascarilla from San Gabriel every Friday³.

In addition to my teaching duties, I conducted research designed to evaluate the school's performance and to identify and suggest practical reforms that might improve the education received by the community's primary school students. Working at the school provided me with an ideal opportunity to employ the techniques of participant observation to gather behavioral data and to develop an understanding of the school's organizational culture. The extensive interviews that I conducted with ten Mascarilla residents, ages thirteen through eighteen, who had received their primary education at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" also formed a central component of my research. The data gathered during these ten interviews was further supplemented by the valuable information I received during extensive conversations with Salomón Acosta (president of FECONIC, the Federation of Black Communities and Organizations of Imbabura and Carchi Provinces) and Nelson Reascos (philosophy professor at Quito's Universidad Católica and author of a proposal to improve Ecuador's education system), as well as formal interviews with three people who had attended *escuela* in nearby non-black communities. Also extremely helpful were informal conversations with numerous Mascarilla residents, with the participants and officials of two local NGOs (FECONIC and the Carchi Consortium), and with the primary school teachers from throughout the Chota Valley who attended a regional teachers' conference held April 25, 1999, in Piquiucho. This article relies on the insights shared by these many informants, as well as my own observations, to consider how the performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," a predominantly black school in a predominantly non-black nation, is affected by issues of cultural aggression and institutional racism.

The Performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez"

One assessment of Ecuador's school system describes the experience within the classrooms of an Ecuadorian public school as "a repressive, repetitive, empiricist pedagogical exercise, without creativity, without any constructive experimentation" (Quiroz Palacios 1988: 82). Another author contends that the teaching methodologies used in Ecuador's *escuelas*, "which are based on repetition and routine... prevent the student from feeling stimulated" (Rossi 1988:119). Other Ecuadorian authors echo these scathing assessments of the country's public schools (Jalil 1988; Rivera Pizarro 1988; Vallejo 1994). An exploration of the performance of Latin American public school systems finds that rural populations and ethnic or racial minorities generally face the greatest obstacles in their quest for quality public education (Almérás 1994). Accordingly, students in the Chota Valley are twice cursed – the region is unquestionably rural, and the vast majority of its residents belong to a racial minority that makes up only six percent of the national population. Based on this information, the working hypothesis I formed prior to my arrival in Mascarilla was that I would find the quality of the education made available to the students at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" to be substantially less than ideal.

In October 1998, during my first visit to Mascarilla, I had the first of my many conversations with FECONIC president Salomón Acosta. As we discussed the aims of my project, I was told that many students from Mascarilla, upon completing their final year at the local *escuela*, are required to repeat the sixth grade at another *escuela* before being granted entrance to a *colegio* (secondary school) because they are not sufficiently prepared to continue their education. Those Escuela "Hernando Táquez" graduates who do progress directly to the *colegio* often find themselves behind their peers from other communities, and many are forced to repeat their first year due to unacceptable academic performance. Such is the dissatisfaction with the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" that a number of families in Mascarilla pay to send their children to Mira, the nearest non-black community, or to Ibarra, the closest urban area, so that they might receive an adequate primary education.

Months after my initial visit to Mascarilla, as I was interviewing recent Escuela "Hernando Táquez" graduates, I sought to confirm Acosta's pessimistic appraisal of the local school's performance. As such, the first question I posed during each interview was the

following: "Using the same zero-to-twenty scale that teachers in Ecuador use to evaluate their students, what mark would you give to the education you received while you were a student at the Escuela 'Hernando Táquez?'" The average mark given to the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" was 15.4, the equivalent of a "C+." More damning than this mediocre evaluation were the answers given to my first follow-up question: When asked if they believe that the local *escuela* is better than, equal to, or worse than other public *escuelas* in Ecuador's northern highlands, seven respondents told me that the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is worse than other primary schools. The other three respondents all said that the primary school in Mascarilla is equal to *escuelas* elsewhere; not one person opined that the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is better than average when compared to other primary schools in the area. The comments made by one respondent, a student in her third year at a *colegio* in Ibarra, are representative of the opinions expressed by the seven Escuela "Hernando Táquez" graduates who believe that the education available in Mascarilla is sub-standard:

I have some friends who attended *escuela* in Ibarra. When we entered the *colegio*, they knew more than I did because I was not taught as much here as they had been.... When I was in the *escuela* here, to go to an *escuela* in Ibarra, it would have been as if I had not learned anything. Why? Because the education there is more advanced. They receive knowledge and abilities there that are not even mentioned to us here.

Naturally, I then asked these recent graduates to explain why they think that their *escuela* is worse than other primary schools in Ecuador's northern highlands. Most of them placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the eight teachers who work at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." Specifically, the teachers were chastised by their former students for their unprofessional behavior. During the interviews I conducted, anger and dismay at the teachers' irresponsibility was expressed time and again. "The teachers who come here only come to drink coffee." "They are not responsible to the children." "The teachers do not do anything." "The teachers here only like to converse." "Some of the professors are only here to pass time, hit the students, and they do nothing." "Nothing happens because nobody is in control." *Ad infinitum*. In particular, the poor performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" was blamed on the fact that the teachers are routinely absent from their classrooms, and on the inadequacy of the homework assignments that the students are given.

The prevailing sense that the performance of the local school is not normal was confirmed by the observations I made while working at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." During the six months I spent in Mascarilla, the amount of actual in-the-classroom, teacher-student contact time that is squandered on a daily basis emerged as one of the greatest failings of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." The school's schedule calls for 4.5 hours of classroom instruction each day; yet, even before the completion of my first week at the school, it became obvious that the actual amount of teacher-student contact time is much less than this. Curious to discover roughly how much time is lost on a daily basis, thirteen times I documented the amount of time that the school's teachers were actually in the classroom with their students. I found that, on average, each class is actually in session for only 2.8 of the 4.5 hours of instruction that are scheduled.

Various activities account for all of this lost and wasted time. Fifteen to twenty minutes of available instruction time are lost nearly every morning as the students perform a variety of military-style exercises, exercises such as marching on command that are intended not as physical exercise, but rather as drills designed only to make the students more obedient. More time is lost on the many days when the teachers decide to allow the mid-morning break to last considerably longer than the thirty minutes provided by the school's schedule. Teacher-student contact time is further diminished by the inordinate number of meetings held by the school's eight full-time teachers. Nearly every single day, some (and many times all) of the teachers gather together outside their classrooms, during class hours, to discuss various matters while their students are left unattended. Not one of the ten recent graduates I interviewed believed that the teachers' meetings are *always* related to events at the school; five of them told me that they believe that these meetings are *never* related to the school.

When I asked these recent graduates what they think happens during these frequent meetings, one young man told me that "all they do is gossip." Another recent graduate concurred:

What do you think, that the teachers meet in order to talk about teaching? No, it is just what interests them. They leave the students playing, ruining everything, while they are simply having conversations, nothing else.

My own observations support these students' conclusions – while the teachers did sometimes meet in

order to decide upon scheduling matters or other issues related to the school, the majority of these meetings revolved around often-frivolous personal matters. As an example, I recall one morning when classes began more than ninety minutes late because all eight teachers were gathered outside taking part in a heated argument prompted by one teacher's belief that, while she was walking towards the bus stop in Ibarra, one of the other teachers saw her and deliberately neglected to tell the bus driver to stop.

The specter of irresponsibility raised by the various time-wasting actions taken by the teachers when they are present at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is magnified by the frequency with which they do not arrive in Mascarilla by 7:30, the time classes are scheduled to begin. Indeed, the number of days when all eight teachers were present on the school grounds on time was outnumbered by the number of days that one or more teachers did not arrive in Mascarilla until after the school's scheduled start time by a two-to-one ratio. Perhaps because the teachers' frequent late arrivals are easily observed, this habit raised the collective ire of community members more than any other single infraction committed by the teachers.

Although the eight teachers must rely on busses to travel to Mascarilla from their homes in Ibarra, their frequent tardiness cannot be blamed on a lack of available transportation. Every morning at 6:30 there is a bus that leaves Ibarra for El Ángel. This bus passes through Mascarilla, within 200 meters of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," at roughly 7:10. If the teachers were to ride this bus, they would rarely, if ever, be late for the scheduled start of the school day. Unfortunately, the teachers almost never arrive on this bus; instead they catch one of the numerous Tulcán-bound busses, which deposit them at a bridge 1.5 kilometers south of Mascarilla. Even though it takes no more than twenty minutes to walk from this bridge to the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," the teachers refuse to do so. Rather than walk, they either hitch rides from passing private vehicles or they wait until another bus headed towards El Ángel comes along, and as such they often arrive late. Why do they refuse to walk? According to one recent graduate, "they are not here on time because they are lazy." Another former student concluded that they do not arrive on time "because they are very irresponsible." I do not know how one could refute this last conclusion.

If the time-wasting I observed during my six months at the *escuela* is not remedied, then by the time the children who were in the first grade are ready to

graduate to the *colegio*, they will have missed out on more than two full school-years worth of classroom instruction. Certainly this alone could account for the school's poor academic performance (as measured and demonstrated by the difficulties Escuela "Hernando Táquez" graduates have had upon entering the *colegio*). Yet, while the teachers at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" have found a wide variety of ways to lessen the amount of time they actually spend in the classroom teaching their students, they do eventually enter the classroom. Unfortunately, their choice of teaching methodologies severely limits the amount of education that occurs once class is in session. In particular, the teachers' puzzling misuse of the school textbook serves as an obstacle to the students' education.

Scholars who have studied primary education have long employed analyses of the school textbook. One such analysis of six different textbook series used in Ecuadorian *escuelas* concluded that the texts in question were "poorly structured in their presentation, literarily simple, and uninteresting due to their abstract nature" (Jalil 1988:143). The textbook series used at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," the *El libro del escolar ecuatoriano* series, was not considered in that study. This series has a single, all-encompassing textbook for each grade level. The volume that I examined most rigorously, the book used by the sixth-grade class, is divided into six sections, which are further divided into forty-nine units. Nearly every single unit contains a final summary, which includes a combination of review questions, practice exercises, and other activities for the student to complete. These various activities are designed to complement and expand upon the teacher's lectures and the readings contained in the textbook.

If the sixth-grade text is representative of the entire series, then the *El libro del escolar ecuatoriano* series certainly does not suffer from the grave shortcomings cited by Jalil. Most subjects are presented in clear yet not simplistic language, and the book's organization is both logical and easy to follow. The activities presented in the unit summaries, if assigned, would likely increase both the students' understanding of the various topics and their enthusiasm for learning. Unfortunately, however, the caveat "if assigned" must be used because, with very few exceptions, the students at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" are never made to complete the questions, practice exercises, and other activities that are contained in the unit summaries. Rather, the homework that is assigned corresponds perfectly to the condemnation of Ecuador's public school system leveled by Quiroz Palacios – it is at once

repetitive, repressive, and lacking creativity.

What exactly is it that the students of the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” do when they are doing their homework? They copy! With the exception of the math problems that their teacher routinely assigns, the only homework assignment the sixth-grade students ever have to do is to copy from their textbook. Day in and day out, the teacher assigns a certain number of pages from whatever unit the class is studying, and the students are then required to copy these pages, word-for-word (including all maps, pictures, and diagrams), into their notebooks. When I discussed this practice with recent graduates of the *escuela*, I was assured that the sixth-grade teacher is not alone in assigning only this menial form of homework.

Asked what possible purpose it might serve to force the students to copy *verbatim* from their textbook each and every day, only two people were reluctantly able to mention any benefits at all. One noted that copying the textbook serves to make the students practice their penmanship. Another person suggested that, by copying the textbook, the students are forced to actually read its lectures. While it is undoubtedly true that the students do receive ample opportunity to improve their handwriting, it is ridiculous to suggest that good penmanship alone has much real value. As for the other supposed benefit, watching my host brother spend hours each evening completing this assignment convinced me that being forced to copy the book actually precludes the student from truly reading it – when the student is reading only four or five words at a time, then sentences, paragraphs, and ultimately entire lectures become nothing more than meaningless arrangements of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks.

Many community members share the ire and incredulity that I felt when I learned that this is what homework is at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez.” One recent graduate summarized the feelings expressed by many when she told me that these assignments “are very bad, because they do not help the students to develop their intellect.” This same person expressed puzzlement wondering what the teachers hope to accomplish by ordering their students to copy from the textbook: “How is it possible that they only assign me to copy from the textbook, only to imitate the author who wrote it? Doing this, I do not develop anything.” Another young woman expanded on the negative repercussions that all this copying has on the students’ intellectual development, noting that, “when the students are asked something, they do not know how to answer or to think for themselves without looking into

a book.”

Were I to evaluate the academic performance of the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” in the same manner that I had asked my ten interview subjects to grade the education they had received at the school, I would be far less generous than they were. Considering the teachers’ demonstrated unprofessional behavior, their penchant for wasting time, and their failure to effectively utilize the resources provided by the school textbook, I would argue that the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” completely fails in its mission to provide children in Mascarilla with a sufficiently high-quality primary education. This conclusion leaves two key questions: Why do these teachers treat their students with so little respect, and why is this situation allowed to continue?

Racism and the Poor Performance of the Escuela “Hernando Táquez”

Having spoken to recent graduates about their experiences, and having formed my own negative evaluation of the school’s performance, I was eager to learn how this *escuela* compares to other *escuelas* in Ecuador’s northern highlands. Toward this end, I met with and spoke to three people who had completed their primary education at public *escuelas* in three nearby non-black communities (San Vicente de Pusir, Mira, and Pimampiro). More than anything else, what sets the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” apart from the *escuelas* that these three people had attended is the amount of time that is wasted in Mascarilla. Indeed, each person was as surprised and appalled to hear of the amount of time that is lost at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” due to the teachers’ unprofessional behavior as I had become while witnessing this phenomenon on a daily basis. All three told me that their *escuelas* performed morning exercises, like those required every day in Mascarilla, only one day each week. None of them reported the types of excessive time-wasting that I routinely observed in Mascarilla. Particularly relevant were the comments made by a young woman, then a student in her final year at a *colegio* in Ibarra, who had completed her primary education in San Vicente de Pusir (the only large community in the Chota Valley where blacks do not form a large percentage of the population).

As is the case at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez,” all of the teachers who work at the *escuela* in San Vicente commute to work from Ibarra using public transportation. Nonetheless, according to this young woman’s recollections, the teachers always arrived in

San Vicente together and on time. Furthermore, she told me that in San Vicente “the schedule is good – the recess ends at 10:30 and the teachers continue with their classes.” Meetings there were kept to a minimum: “they had their meetings, but they did not miss much time in the classroom.” And what of homework, were students in San Vicente also forced to copy their textbooks? “No. They assigned us questions. Because to copy, what does it do to copy?” As I continued to talk with this young woman, it became apparent to both her and I that the performance of the *escuela* in San Vicente de Pusir far exceeds the performance of the Escuela “Hernando Táquez.” By arriving on time for classes, by not allowing the recess to exceed thirty minutes, by limiting the number of meetings held during class hours, and by giving their students relevant and constructive homework assignments, the teachers in San Vicente demonstrate much more dedication to their job and respect for their students than do their Mascarilla counterparts.

I asked this young woman if she felt that the education ministry intentionally and systematically assigns the worst teachers to black communities such as Mascarilla, and the better teachers to white communities like San Vicente. She did not believe this to be the case:

No, what happens is, the teachers who have just received their training go to the peripheral areas. No, it is not racism. The teachers who have just graduated are sent there, and it is because they do not have much experience that they do not do a good job of teaching their classes. They are first sent to the outlying areas, and then they continue to climb and climb until they arrive here, in the city (Ibarra).

Yet, if racism is not a factor, what explains the fact that the teachers who work in San Vicente perform their duties in a much more professional manner than do their colleagues in Mascarilla? Certainly, San Vicente is no less “peripheral” than Mascarilla – although it is slightly larger than Mascarilla, its location away from the Pan-American Highway at the end of a dirt path that passes over a partially-collapsed bridge makes it considerably more isolated than Mascarilla. Perhaps bad luck alone has brought these particularly unmotivated and undisciplined teachers to the Escuela “Hernando Táquez.” It seems more likely, however, that there is indeed some connection between the poor performance of the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” and the fact that most of the school's students are black.

In order to understand how the students’ race might affect the quality of the education that they receive, I asked my interview subjects a number of questions about racial relations at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez.” When asked if they believed that the white teachers demonstrate racist attitudes toward their predominantly black classes, five of the ten recent graduates that I interviewed firmly refuted this notion, and two others expressed uncertainty regarding the matter. Yet, of the remaining three respondents who did identify the teachers as racists, two considered the teachers' racist attitudes to be one of the primary obstacles that prevent students in Mascarilla from obtaining a quality education. Indeed, one respondent argued that:

It is only because we are black that they leave us easy things to do. They should always give out at least one difficult assignment so that something enters the students’ heads. Then someone could leave here ahead.... The teachers here are bad in this way. Sometimes I think to myself that the teachers are not interested in us, because they say that this is only a community of blacks. That is the only thing that we are sometimes startled by, by the things that they say about us.

My own observations support this overall mixed response to the question of whether or not the teachers are racists. I was repeatedly advised by my teaching colleagues not to become involved with any of the (black) women in the community, because the (white) women in Ibarra are both prettier and “better.” One teacher routinely singled out the lone white boy in her class of twenty-eight students and praised both his schoolwork and his behavior. But as a general rule, the eight teachers who work at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez” do seem to treat their students equally, without regard to race.

Approaching the issue of racism from a different angle, I asked my ten interview subjects if the mere fact that all eight teachers at the *escuela* are white is a problem. Only one person responded that this, in and of itself, is a problem. Yet, when asked if it would be better to have black teachers at the school, be they from Mascarilla or from elsewhere in the Chota Valley, five of the nine people who had said that it is not a problem that all of the teachers are white went on to tell me that it would be better if there were black teachers at the Escuela “Hernando Táquez.” The explanations given for this apparent contradiction were fairly uniform –

while these five people did not believe that the teachers openly displayed racist attitudes, they did feel that black teachers might be better able to teach the children of Mascarilla. One young woman summarized the opinions of many when she stated that, "by being black professors, a part of our race, they would know how to understand us. The white professors, some of them do, but some do not." In addition to the consideration raised by this comment – that black teachers would have more in common (a common racial heritage and a common cultural background) with the students of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" than do the *escuela's* present teachers – the issue of motivation was raised.

As detailed above, the one aspect of the teachers' performance that most upset community members was their demonstrated irresponsibility. Many residents viewed the teachers' various irresponsible and unprofessional habits as manifestations of their lack of concern for the students' education. One young woman told me that she believes that the teachers "do not care about us." Another interviewee speculated that, if the teachers were black, "maybe then they would have more love... to teach their own people." Each person who speculated about the reasons why the teachers at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" so blatantly neglect their responsibilities pointed to racism as a likely cause. As such, it becomes more understandable why five people who did not identify the racial composition of the all-white teaching staff as a problem went on to argue that the students would benefit from having black teachers.

Perhaps the unprofessional behavior exhibited by the teachers who work at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," and the school's subsequent poor performance, are the results not of any sinister lack of concern for the students' education and well-being, but rather the results of the teachers' own inadequate training and preparation. But even if the teachers themselves are not racists, the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" may still be identified as a racist institution. According to the definition of institutional racism provided by the Commission for Racial Equality, "if racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racial intentions" (MacPherson 1999:30). Ultimately, if community members consider the *escuela* to be a racist institution, then it may not be particularly important whether or not the teachers who work at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" are themselves racists.

Indeed, I did find that even those graduates who do

not believe that the teachers at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" harbor racist attitudes do identify the *escuela* as a racist institution. When asked if Ecuador's regional and national school administrators are racists, six people (including two who found no racism in the teachers' attitudes and behaviors) responded in the affirmative. Unlike the results when I asked these same ten people about the teachers at the *escuela*, not one person explicitly denied the implication that the poor performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" might be related to racist attitudes within the education ministry. One respondent offered the following evaluation of Ecuador's school administrators: "They are all a group of idiots. They say 'I am an administrator,' but they do absolutely nothing. I do not know if it is due to racism or whatever, but they do not care about us." Another argued that this demonstrated lack of concern is indeed a result of racism: "I think there is racism, because if there was not, then they (representatives of the education ministry) would come down on the teachers who do not teach us."

Cultural Education and Cultural Aggression

The Chota Valley residents' unhappiness with the local primary schools is not limited to their displeasure with the poor academic preparation that the students receive. Many residents also complain that the local schools do nothing to assist the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. Indeed, this concern was one of the central themes of a January 1999 FECONIC workshop held in the Chota Valley community of Carpuela. Throughout the course of this workshop, various delegates let it be known that they consider the preservation of the region's unique culture (which is increasingly falling victim to the ever-expanding influence of national and international mass media outlets) to be no less important than the need for further economic development or the demand for improved social services in this impoverished region.

At the national level, both the Afro-Ecuadorian Cultural Center (CCA) and the National Afro-Ecuadorian Pastoral Institute (INPA) organize a variety of events and seminars designed to bolster the identity and culture of Ecuador's black populations. At the regional level, various community groups organize festivals, pageants, dances, and athletic competitions designed to help strengthen the bonds that link the Chota Valley's many villages. To some extent, the region's educators have also taken a role in the local population's efforts to maintain their distinct cultural identity. In June 1998, teachers from the Colegio Técnico Nacional "Valle del Chota" organized the First

Annual Scholastic Bomba Festival. In early 1999, teachers from five different *escuelas* in the Chota Valley worked together with community members to publish a compilation of the region's couplets (Varela Jara 1999). Yet, for all the support that the region's educators have given to cultural initiatives that take place outside the school, nothing is being done inside the classroom to promote the preservation of the Chota Valley's cultural heritage.

As valuable as private organizations' actions and activities may be, participation is voluntary, so these organizations' message of cultural preservation does not reach all of the Chota Valley's residents. Many residents recognize the inclusion of some sort of cultural education at the primary school level as the most effective means of preventing the extinction of the region's unique culture. Given the small size of the Chota Valley, school textbooks aimed at a national audience cannot be criticized too harshly for making no specific mention of the region or of its predominantly black population. At the same time, the teachers' urban white background inhibits them from being able to provide the cultural education that is missing from these textbooks. While the idea of having community members volunteer to provide cultural education in the region's *escuelas* has been proposed, no such efforts have yet been initiated. As such, the Chota Valley's primary schools are presently unable to provide the cultural education that many area residents demand.

If it were only that the *escuela* neglected minority cultures, that would be one matter; however, evidence suggests that the Ecuadorian *escuela* may do more than this, that it actively undermines efforts to preserve minority cultures. Indeed, one Ecuadorian author argues that, from the perspective of Ecuador's marginalized minority populations, the nation's primary schools should be recognized as the battleground which hosts "a confrontation between the culture that is transmitted in the home and in the community, and the culture of school" (Rossi 1988:114). She contends that, through the use of school curricula that present white knowledge, culture, and morals as the cornerstones of the legitimate national identity, the Ecuadorian *escuela* intentionally "pursues the exclusion of everything that is different and distinct" (Rossi 1988:110). At the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," evidence of this type of cultural aggression can be found on the pages of the school textbook.

By examining a school textbook, one sees in words and in pictures both the knowledge and the perspectives to which the students are exposed. Due to the immense

significance of the text, subtext, and context of the school textbook, the choice of which textbook shall be used is perhaps the most important decision school administrators are forced to make as they establish a school's curriculum. These textbooks do not author themselves, of course, nor do they contain every available bit of information, nor do they provide every possible interpretation of natural and historical events. Rather, school textbooks "are at once the results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises. They are conceived, designed, and authored by real people with real interests.... (They represent) particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting that vast universe of possible knowledge" (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991:1-3). The textbook does not just deliver facts, but rather it "screens in and out certain ideas and realms of knowledge... (predisposing students) to think and act in certain ways, and not to consider other possibilities, questions, or actions" (Sleeter and Grant 1991:80).

Given the immense social authority that is carried on the pages of the primary school textbook, it comes as no surprise that competing social groups attempt to leverage their political power in order to ensure that it is their version of "the truth" that is included in, and legitimized by, the public school curricula. In Ecuador, it is the white population that consistently emerges as the victor in battles over school curricula. The educational planners who represent this dominant social group have instituted primary school curricula that have as their top priority the creation of a greater sense of national unity. While its backers contend that this project of national unity is necessary to ensure the maintenance of Ecuador's fragile democracy, critics assign a more sinister purpose to the school curricula that have been instituted by the ruling elite.

Arguing that educational planners have purposefully developed school curricula that serve to promote white culture as the only true Ecuadorian culture, critics identify the so-called project of national unity as an act of "institutionalized cultural aggression" (Rossi 1988:116). Because the dominant class views its values and its culture as the true Ecuadorian values and culture, that which emerges from the school textbook as legitimate knowledge excludes the histories and the cultural expressions of Ecuador's black and indigenous populations. As such, there is no room for the type of cultural education that many Chota Valley residents would like to see as part of the primary school curriculum. The textbook's neglectful and often-negative portrayal of minority cultures contributes to the social distance that exists between minority

communities and the institution of the *escuela*. By teaching minority students that their cultural heritage is illegitimate, the textbook teaches black and indigenous Ecuadorians that they should not have pride in their communities, their families, or themselves.

Evidence of this attack on Ecuador's minority cultures is found in the geography unit of the sixth grade textbook used at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," in its introduction to the world beyond the Americas. This unit's section on Africa presents the students with the following "information" about that continent's residents:

The African continent is inhabited by an infinity of tribes who lead primitive and semi-savage lives, since European influences have not yet reached but a few regions. Some of the African tribes have curious customs.... The forests of the Congo are inhabited by the curious pygmies.... The Mohammedan religion, introduced by the Arabs, is predominant. Christianity is practiced in Egypt and in Abyssinia. The blacks and other diverse tribes have different beliefs, and they practice strange and primitive rites.

Additionally, one of the activities at the end of the section asks the students to "learn about curiosities of the African tribes" (Carrillo de Landázuri 1986:327-329).

Of course, the section on Europe does not instruct the students to "learn about curiosities of," say, the French. Predictably, there are no "tribes" in Europe. Europeans are neither "primitive" nor "semi-savage." Rather, "the European continent is characterized as being the promoter of scientific, technological, and artistic advances" (Carrillo de Landázuri 1986:300). No European peoples are "curious," and Europeans do not "practice strange and primitive rites." The essence of the text's message is quite clear – all that is good is derived from Europe, which is not coincidentally the ancestral home of Ecuador's white ruling class. In contrast, that which originates in Africa, the ancestral home of most of the students at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," is primitive, curious, and strange.

The potential damage caused by "information" such as this textbook's depiction of the African continent and its inhabitants is far-reaching. Teachers' presumptions "regarding the intelligence and abilities of pupils, their physical appearance, their verbal ability, their conduct,

their race, or their gender, constitute variables that influence fundamentally the practice of teachers and rebound on the educational output of pupils" (Morrow and Torres 1995:62). If the white teachers who work in the Chota Valley believe "information" such as this textbook's account of Africa, then their expectations about their black students' potential are likely quite low. And if teachers do not expect that their students will achieve, then they will likely be less motivated to try to help them achieve. Such low expectations may explain (at least in part) the unprofessional behavior of the teachers who work at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez," and they may also lend validity to the complaint made by the former student who told me that she was convinced that "it is only because we are black that they leave us easy things to do."

For their part, the black students who are forced to read (and copy) the accounts of Africa that are included in their school texts are encouraged to question the validity of their own customs and traditions, and indeed of their own worth. At the same time, non-black students are provided with "information" that encourages the formation of racist beliefs and attitudes. And so a vicious cycle is formed – with the assistance of the *escuela*, racism becomes institutionalized throughout society; at the same time, that racism which already exists constitutes itself as an obstacle to the educational pursuits and achievements of black students.

Conclusion

The one certain conclusion that I was able to draw from my six-month stay in Mascarilla is that the performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is both abnormal and inadequate. The students' academic preparation is severely hindered by the teachers' unprofessional behavior, and by the repetitive and repressive nature of their homework assignments. Meaningful cultural education is entirely absent from the classroom, due in no small part to the fact that the teachers are not part of the community in which they work. Moreover, as though it were not enough that the Chota Valley's history and traditions are completely ignored by the school curricula approved as part of Ecuador's national unity project, the distorted vision of Africa that is presented by the school's textbooks may serve to lower black students' self-esteem and to diminish their desire to learn about and preserve their own cultural heritage.

It may be impossible to prove that the performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is poor by design,

that the school's various inadequacies and dysfunctions are the intended results of racially-motivated decisions made by Ecuador's education ministry. Yet, the fact that the teachers' unprofessional and disrespectful behavior is allowed to continue, without so much as a comment from the government officials who are ostensibly in charge of ensuring that quality primary education is made available to Ecuadorians of all racial and cultural backgrounds, does support that dubious conclusion. While the exact nature of the relationship between the racial composition of Mascarilla's population and the abnormally poor performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is not clear, there is reason to believe that it is no mere coincidence that such an ineffective *escuela* is located in what is "only a community of blacks."

Notes

1. The author, Kevin Lucas, anxiously awaits his upcoming journey to El Salvador, where he will serve as a Peace Corps volunteer. He can be contacted via email at <honesternie@lycos.com>. The field research upon which this contribution is based was conducted while the author was a participant in the Minnesota Studies in International Development program organized by the University of Minnesota and the Fundación CIMAS del Ecuador. This article presents a synthesis of information and arguments presented in the author's M.A. thesis, submitted to Dr. Peter Van Arsdale at the University of Denver's Graduate School of International Studies.

2. The term "black" is used throughout this text to describe all persons of African descent because this is the term used by the Afro-Ecuadorian residents of the Chota Valley. Indeed, the word "negro" ("black") is often used in place of the word "gente" ("people"), so phrases such as "*habían muchos negros allá*" (meaning "there were a lot of people there") are heard often. Likewise, the term "white" is used throughout this text to refer to all persons who are neither black nor indigenous. This category includes both "*blancos*" (people of predominantly European descent) and "*mestizos*" (Ecuador's largest racial group, consisting of those people of mixed European and indigenous heritage who do not identify themselves as indigenous).

3. This situation (black students, white teachers) is certainly not unique to Mascarilla. Of the seventy-one people who attended the regional teachers' conference in Piquiicho, exactly one, a man who teaches at the *escuela* in Caldera, was black. Moreover, as is the case in Mascarilla, most of the teachers who attended this

conference do not live in the Chota Valley, but rather commute to their jobs from Ibarra or from San Gabriel.

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