

(SELF)EDUCATION ACROSS BORDERS: INNOVATIONS IN POSTDIGITAL LEARNING SPACES (BRAZIL-NEW ZEALAND)¹

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ABSTRACT

The article explores an educational and intercultural study program resulting from a partnership between Massey University and the University of São Paulo - which involved a visit, in 2023, of 10 teacher education students from New Zealand to various educational institutions in São Paulo. The program included alongside remote and in-person activities, and the documentation of participants' impressions were recorded in reflective journals and social media. This analysis took place as part of a research project, the aim of which was to investigate various dimensions of the educational processes in the two countries, considering cultural aspects and the relationship with technological resources. Based on Canclini's notion of cultural hybridity, Freire's critical theory, and the debate on postdigital thinking, the study sought to identify the challenges and potential of this experience, highlighting the conversation circle as a fundamental teaching strategy, so that digital-related learning cannot be

¹ Translated by Genaro Oliveira.

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understood separately from the sociopolitical, economic, environmental, and cultural context of the Global South.

Keywords: educational and intercultural program, Brazil-New Zealand, teacher education, postdigital, cultural hybridity

RESUMEN

(AUTO)FORMACIÓN TRANSFRONTERIZA: INNOVACIONES EN ESPACIOS DE APRENDIZAJE POSTDIGITALES (BRASIL-NUOVA ZELANDA)²

El artículo explora un programa de estudio educativo e intercultural — resultado de la colaboración entre Universities New Zealand y la Universidad de São Paulo — que involucró la visita, en 2023, de 10 estudiantes de pregrado de Nueva Zelanda a diversos centros educativos en São Paulo, con actividades tanto remotas como presenciales, así como el registro de sus impresiones en diarios de campo y redes sociales. El análisis de estos registros se vincula a una investigación sobre las múltiples dimensiones de los procesos formativos en ambos países, teniendo en cuenta aspectos culturales y la relación con los recursos tecnológicos. Basándose en la noción de hibridismo cultural de Canclini, la teoría crítica de Freire y el debate sobre el pensamiento posdigital, se buscó identificar desafíos y potencialidades de esta experiencia, destacándose la importancia de los círculos de conversación como estrategia pedagógica. Así, se concluye que los aprendizajes vinculados a lo digital no pueden disociarse del contexto sociopolítico, económico, ambiental y cultural del Sur Global.

Palabras clave: programa educativo e intercultural, Brasil-Nueva Zelanda, formación docente, posdigital, hibridismo cultural.

RESUMO

(AUTO)FORMAÇÃO ALÉM DAS FRONTEIRAS: INOVAÇÕES EM ESPAÇOS DE APRENDIZAGEM PÓS-DIGITAIS (BRASIL-NOVA ZELÂNDIA)

O artigo explora um programa de estudo educacional e intercultural – fruto da parceria entre a Universities New Zealand e a Universidade de São Paulo – que envolveu a visita, em 2023, de 10 licenciandos da Nova Zelândia a vários locais de ensino em São Paulo, atividades remotas e presenciais, bem como o registro de suas impressões em diários de bordo e redes sociais. A análise desses registros vincula-se a uma pesquisa sobre as diversas dimensões dos processos formativos nos dois países, considerando aspectos culturais e a relação com os recursos tecnológicos. Com base na noção de hibridismo cultural de Canclini, na teoria crítica de Freire e no debate sobre o pensamento pós-digital, buscou-se identificar desafios e potencialidades dessa experiência, constatando a importância da roda de conversa como uma estratégia de ensino, de modo que as aprendizagens ligadas ao digital não podem ser dissociadas do contexto sociopolítico, econômico, ambiental e cultural do Sul Global.

Palavras-chave: programa educacional e intercultural, Brasil-Nova Zelândia, formação docente, pós-digital, hibridismo cultural.

² Translated by Maria Lúcia O. Marques.

1. “What are they doing?”: initial considerations

“What are they doing?” asked a New Zealand graduate, perplexed, when he saw around 30 teenagers sitting in a circle on the floor of a multi-sports court. From a distance, it was impossible to hear the content of the conversation. But the teenagers’ enthusiastic body gestures, tone of voice, and laughter as they shared ideas suggested that they were engaged in a passionate discussion. “They’re in a student assembly,” said the host, a young student who was guiding the visit through a public school in the city of São Paulo. “It’s a daily event for the students here,” she continued in fluent English, proudly explaining that these “circles of conversation” allow students to democratically discuss “topics relevant to their lives, to the school,” and to Brazilian and global societies. This interaction took place during a visit to the Municipal Elementary School (EMEF) “Desembargador Amorim Lima”, which has become known for breaking down classroom walls and implementing a non-directive pedagogy aimed at students’ intellectual autonomy. This moment, as we will see throughout this article, will have a central importance for the group, being mentioned as a reference of an inspiring educational practice.

This visit was one of the activities of the study program, funded by the *Prime Minister’s Scholarship for Latin America* (PMSLA) of the New Zealand government and linked to the project, developed jointly between Massey University and USP, under the coordination of Professor Diana Vidal (FEUSP) and supported by FAPESP (Mobilidade/SPRINT, Edição 2019/04 - Processo N. 2020/00894-5) - which in turn began in 2019 (Mobilidade/SPRINT, Edição 2019/04 - Processo N. 2020/00894-5). 2020/00894-5) - which, in turn, is associated with the Thematic Project *Knowledge and practices on borders: for a transnational history of education (1810-...)*, which began in 2019 (Process N. 2018/26699-4). This article analyzes the

materials produced about this program, which included ten students from an Initial Teacher education Course at a public university in New Zealand, who traveled to São Paulo (Brazil) in June 2023 to visit five public schools (state and municipal), as well as other places of cultural and historical interest, with to the purpose of learning about cross-border education. This analysis took place as part of a research project, the aim of which was to investigate various dimensions of the education processes in the two countries, taking into account not only cultural aspects but also the relationship with technological resources, thus focusing on the learning resulting from this journey. It was an effort to identify the challenges and potential of this experience, which fostered a debate about the social, political and economic aspects of education, highlighting the conversation circle as a fundamental strategy for broadening understanding of the postdigital space.

In this sense, the web of elements that came together to make up a postdigital learning space (Lamb et al, 2022) in the study program is explored, considering the digital, social, political and economic dimensions of these learning experiences, taking as a starting point the reflections produced by the undergraduates on the conditions and contradictions that influence education in New Zealand and Brazilian society. The production of these reflections was systematic, beginning in the run-up to the trip and continuing throughout their stay in São Paulo. They were expressed not only in learning tasks previously prepared by the researchers - and therefore more formal - but also in a blog entries and on social media, which were more spontaneous in nature. These records, which involved both pre-travel online interactions and face-to-face interactions with students and teachers from basic education and higher education in Brazil, constituted the core sources of the analysis carried out here.

By focusing on the specificities of postdigital spaces, with a Brazilian megalopolis as the core, the analysis privileges key design

elements and emerging themes related to learning, which go beyond traditional teaching spaces and involve the articulation between different cultures, from a perspective that considers multifaceted socio-cultural aspects and not just cognitive actions (Pischetola, 2022). Despite its multifaceted meanings, the concept of postdigital (Jandrić et al, 2018) proves fertile for understanding the speed with which changes in technology and its presence in education have been noticed. This is because the prefix “post” does not suggest a later phase or a new time period in a historical sense, but instead indicates a need to critically evaluate assumptions about the nature of digital technologies in education (Knox, 2019; Ball and Savin-Baden, 2022). Given its near ubiquity, the digital can no longer be analyzed as separate from the social and cultural domains (Coeckelbergh 2020; Jandrić et al, 2018), nor with the classic divisions between face-to-face and virtual, public and private, personal and professional life, which are increasingly inseparable (Pischetola, 2022). In this way, we seek to situate the discussion on education and the digital in a perspective that incorporates Canclini’s (2005) notion of Latin American cultural hybridity as an association of diverse material and immaterial elements that, from colonial times to the present day, have collided to produce new societies and unique ways of life. This hybridity confirms and challenges historically dominant models that include the ideals of the Eurocentric colonizers of the past and unequal societies, particularly those located in the countries of the Global South (Czerniewicz et al, 2020).

Thus, in understanding the complexity of the various elements that combine in postdigital learning spaces for teacher education, it is necessary to recognize a set of “human and non-human” variables that, although often not the subject of pedagogical concerns, interfere in the interconnections that exist between digital, analogue, human and social aspects. By engaging in a reciprocal process of learning about Brazilian culture, accompanied by deep reflec-

tions on their own identities, cultural codes, and expectations, the participants reiterated their role as future teachers in the New Zealand context with their own ways of seeing education.

In this sense, it is also important to consider the tensions that mark the history of New Zealand, which is defined by a fascinating paradox: while historically it has been called “Little England” and considered part of the Western world and the Global North, its identity is actually deeply marked by being a Polynesian archipelago, located at the antipodes of Europe, in the far south and east of the world. Although the process of European colonization began in the 19th century, New Zealand had already been occupied by successive migratory waves of *Māori* navigators, the first arriving around 1300 CE. Since the arrival of the British, *Māori* (indigenous) and *Pākehā* (European descendants) have coexisted in a complex relationship, the first milestone of which was the Treaty of Waitangi, signed between *rangatira* (*Māori* leaders) and representatives of the British Crown in 1840. However, the subsequent colonial wars resulted in significant territorial, linguistic, and demographic losses for *Māori*. However, from the second half of the 20th century, New Zealand experienced a “*Māori* renaissance”, with political and educational advances that strengthened their identity and rights. Recently, this renewal has had a significant impact on the new educational curriculum, structured on the principle of *mana ōrite mō te mātauranga*, which seeks to guarantee epistemic parity between indigenous and Western knowledges. However, with the rise of a center-right coalition government, this decolonizing curriculum could be revoked or reformulated, jeopardizing the progress made in recent decades.

After detailing the references that underpin the analysis presented, the history of the program is described, as well as the main activities carried out; then we move on to analyze the three most recurrent themes in the reflections produced by the undergraduates, namely: circles of conversation as learning spaces;

education, teacher education and social transformation; inclusive education and different perspectives on the colonial past. Finally, considerations are presented about the potential of the intercultural program for teacher education across borders, deepening the debate about the contribution of postdigital thinking to understanding educational processes.

2. Hybrid cultures, postdigital and critical pedagogies in the Brazilian context

Considering the position of Latin American countries in the context of global development, it is possible to understand the main characteristics of the Brazilian education system, which is highly decentralized and unequal, meaning that students often experience many disparities depending on the localities and educational institutions. These disparities concern the distribution of funding and access to quality education, which in turn has repercussions on learning outcomes. The development of education in Latin America is complex, with different issues at stake. One element that is often considered a determinant of this development is the provision of resources and infrastructure, and, amid this, access to new educational technologies (Teräs et al., 2020).

However, rather than considering only the use of the most modern tools in teaching-learning processes, this analysis considers the notion of postdigital to broaden horizons, in which technology in education is seen as the result of relationships between geopolitical, labor, environmental, and cultural aspects of society (Knox, 2019). In this way, it is recognized that narratives about technological development - often based on models from the Global North - tend to ignore the scope of the digital, which is conditioned by multiple elements, including evident inequalities, especially for those who live and learn in the Global South (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

This picture can be better understood with Canclini's (2005) notion of Latin American cultural hybridity, mentioned earlier as an amalgam of diverse material and immaterial elements that, from colonial times to the present day, have collided to produce new societies as a result of the tension between tradition and modernity. This hybridity both confirms and challenges historically dominant models that include Eurocentric ideals of colonization of the past, along with contemporary utopias of the end of history. Cities like Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo (Brazil), and Bogotá (Colombia) bear witness to the ability of Iberian settlers to recreate urban centers and political order à la Lisbon and Madrid. On the other hand, they also gave rise to unstructured urban configurations, such as favelas and barrios, as well as struggles for the rights of Black people and Indigenous peoples, to combat ethnic-racial discrimination and ensure fair access to education and respect for their cultural identity.

In the same way, European colonizers imposed the gospel when they arrived in the 'new world', resulting in religious syncretism between Christianity and religions of African origin. For most people in the Global South, this mixture is part of everyday life. In Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, or Bogotá, it's easy to witness an urban scene that includes skyscrapers and pedigree dogs as signs of the locals' wealth in the same setting as open sewage, signs of deforestation, and people rummaging through garbage. Understanding the nuances of Latin American hybridity is fundamental to the analysis of the reflections made by the undergraduates on their experiences during their stay in São Paulo. These reflections are accompanied by photographs they took themselves throughout the program in Brazil and are shared in this article with permission. More than simple illustrations of places visited, these images capture the complexity of Latin American contexts and offer nuanced evidence of postdigital learning spaces documented in the students' blogs and social media posts.

Jandrić et al. discuss the difficulties of coming up with a strict definition for the concept of postdigital, as it can mean “messy” and “unpredictable” because it associates distinct elements: “digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and social” (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 895). However, despite its multifaceted meanings, postdigital thinking often evokes fundamental ideas - opposition to any binary vision, a resistance to a narrow idea of the digital limited to instrumentalism and technological determinism - thus advocating a transdisciplinary approach that does not fail to consider the political character of human actions (Jandrić, 2023). Postdigital is therefore based on the diffusion of the digital in everyday life and the need to critically evaluate assumptions about the nature of digital technologies in education (Knox, 2019; Ball and Savin-Baden, 2022). As for Brazilian academic production, the discussion of postdigital thinking is still practically absent and seems limited to certain fields of knowledge (Boa Sorte and Vicentini, 2020).³

In this way, the notion of postdigital is understood in this article as the set of elements that are articulated to influence the learning activity, helping to investigate the relationships between them. Postdigital thinking enables a more detailed account of the educational and intercultural experience in the socio-political context of the Global South. By adopting such a perspective, the discussion presented on education and the digital is associated with a broader tradition of critical theories and philosophies. In general terms, critical theories share a common idea about universal grand narratives, criticizing the fact that they disregard heterogeneous and specific regional contexts, reducing them to a single vision of progress, hierarchizing societies and individuals (Hayes, 2022). This perspective is important for the discussion of the research data, the anal-

ysis of which is based on Paulo Freire’s (1974, 1992) studies on critical pedagogies, which have been particularly important for thinking about the challenges facing Brazilian education since the 1960s, when he began his work on adult literacy. His contributions to the field of education question, above all, the dominant structures of socio-economic and political relations, situating it as a universal right, related to political processes and concerned with the critical construction of just, democratic, and sustainable societies (Roberts, 2017).

Freire (1974) defends dialogue as central to pedagogy, seeing students as active participants in the construction of knowledge. He advocates “problem posing education”, stressing that the focus should be on identifying and addressing action-oriented problems, where questioning, critique and debate are encouraged (Roberts, 2017). The underlying assumption is that both teachers and students contribute to an educational situation and this forms the basis for what would later be known as Freire’s circles of culture, which are referred to in this article as conversation circle (Fig. 1). For this pedagogical proposal, as conceived by Freire, it is essential that students and teachers sit in a circle to debate and thus learn about each other. In these conversations, they discuss how people and their interests differ, as everyone brings knowledge about themselves and their world to the debate on the topic in question. An important aspect to note is the physical arrangement of the chairs, organized in circles, which is essential so that everyone can hear and be heard, facilitating dialogue through a non-hierarchical positioning, as will be discussed later.

As explained so far, Canclini’s notion of hybrid cultures, Freire’s critical pedagogy and postdigital thinking were key to analyzing the intercultural study program that encouraged participants to see education as linked to broader cultural, historical and colonial influences, stemming from the inequalities of world geopolitics and power struggles in Latin America. In the next section, the background of the

3 An analysis of Brazilian journals from the last ten years, using the SciELO database, reveals a significant gap in the literature, with only one article discussing the concept of postdigital (referred to as postdigital) in education (Boa Sorte and Vicentini, 2020).

Figure 1 - Conversation circle

Source: EMEF “Desembargador Amorim Lima”. Reproduced with the school’s permission, 2023.

project will be described, focusing on the main elements of the postdigital learning space and then delving into the undergraduates’ learning experiences in Brazil.

3. The Study Abroad Program (New Zealand-Brazil) and the methodological path of the research

The starting point for the analysis presented⁴ is the agreement between Massey University (New Zealand) and the University of São Paulo (Brazil), aimed at promoting educational connections between Aotearoa⁵/New Zealand

and Latin American⁶ countries through the organization of a study abroad programme related to teacher education. There were several stages in the program, in which researchers from both countries were involved – notably the four authors of this article – who worked together from conception (planning activities, contacting the selected institutions, etc.) to analysis of the results, including forms of recording and systematization, as well as theoretical discussion. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from Massey University’s Human Ethics Committee. Throughout the process, the researchers involved took part in the training activities – both face-to-face and online – that made up the educational and intercultural study program in Brazil, particularly in the city of São Paulo, with the aim of creating a professional network of teachers and promoting bilateral school projects, academic research and cultural exchange. The participants in the program were undergraduates enrolled in the initial teacher education course at Massey University in New Zealand/Aotearoa. This is a teacher education course for those who already have a degree and intend to teach in early childhood education, as well as primary and secondary education. All students in the program take digital learning

⁴ As mentioned above, the production of this article has as its starting point the research, related to the SPRINT project (process FAPESP 2020/00894-5), entitled **Teacher education in Brazil and New Zealand: Comparing two periods, the 1930s and the present day**, and involved two authors from each country, who have worked together in recent years not only in articulating collaborative activities between the institutions where they work (Massey University and the University of São Paulo), but also developing research in which the four have worked collaboratively from the conception of the questions investigated to the systematization and analysis of the results, including an extremely enriching exchange with regard to the theoretical references mobilized in these works and the discussion about the reality of the two countries.

⁵ It should be noted that Aotearoa is the name given to the country in the *Māori* language, the native people of New Zealand.

⁶ See <https://scholarships.enz.govt.nz/>. Accessed January 18, 2025.

modules and must take part in two compulsory face-to-face seminars at the two physical campuses, as well as completing practicum periods at school institutions.

The opportunity to take part in the study abroad program was publicized to all students on the initial education course, and potential participants filled in an application form before taking part in an interview. Ten undergraduates were selected to travel to São Paulo, accompanied by a lecturer from Massey University, for a period of three weeks. All the selected participants were citizens or permanent residents living in various regions of New Zealand/Aotearoa. The program involved networking and exchanging experiences with educators and students from Brazilian schools and universities, as well as visits to places of cultural and social importance. It should be noted that all the participants agreed to take part in the research described here, the aim of which, as indicated above, was to investigate the formative experiences resulting from the activities carried out during their stay in São Paulo.

During their time in Brazil, participants were asked to create and develop a blog, using a platform of their choice. They were asked to produce a reflection based on four prompts sent by the researchers at key moments during the three-week program. The first prompt asked about their expectations before departure, while the remaining three suggested that they choose, as the object of their reflection, a significant event from among the activities that had taken place in the days immediately preceding the prompt. At the end of the program, when the participants returned to New Zealand/Aotearoa, they carried out a final reflection in the form of an anonymous survey. The participants used a range of digital technologies to carry out the proposed tasks (e.g., *Padlet*, blog on different platforms) and to create their own digital spaces (e.g., a *WhatsApp* group of students from the two countries and a *Facebook* page).

The qualitative nature of the research required an interpretive approach (Denzin and

Lincoln, 2017), which employed thematic analysis of excerpts from the blogs, audio, or images posted on different types of tools used by the participants and mentioned above (*WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, etc.), respecting their anonymity. We then followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for conducting thematic analysis, which include: a first survey of the data, its systematization, the search for common themes, review, definition of themes, and compilation of a report with vivid examples. After a first contact with the records gathered throughout the experience described here, preliminary categories of analysis were identified, based on which the references present in the sources defined for this research were organized, and the analysis was developed around the most representative aspects, as will be presented below.

4. The design of the learning space

Providing an atmosphere for open debate was essential when designing the program. Conviviality, according to Illich (1973), refers to the ability to interact creatively with others and the environment. Therefore, students were free to express themselves, reflect critically, and discuss their experiences. As the programme graduates were located in different regions of New Zealand/Aotearoa, two online meetings were organized before their departure so that they could get to know each other. These meetings also served as an initial space for them to learn about each other in a friendly atmosphere, as well as to orient the participants on the main aspects of the program. To this end, they were given brief presentations about life and safety in São Paulo, the activities planned in the program, and explanations about the research that would be carried out, as well as opportunities to ask questions. Conversations were also encouraged through a series of activities before, during, and after the trip. Before traveling, the participants used a *Padlet* to make initial contacts and introduce

themselves to the students at the host university in Brazil – USP – involving students from

Teacher Education and other degrees, who did the same (Fig. 2).

Figure 2 - Presentations: students connect via *Padlet*

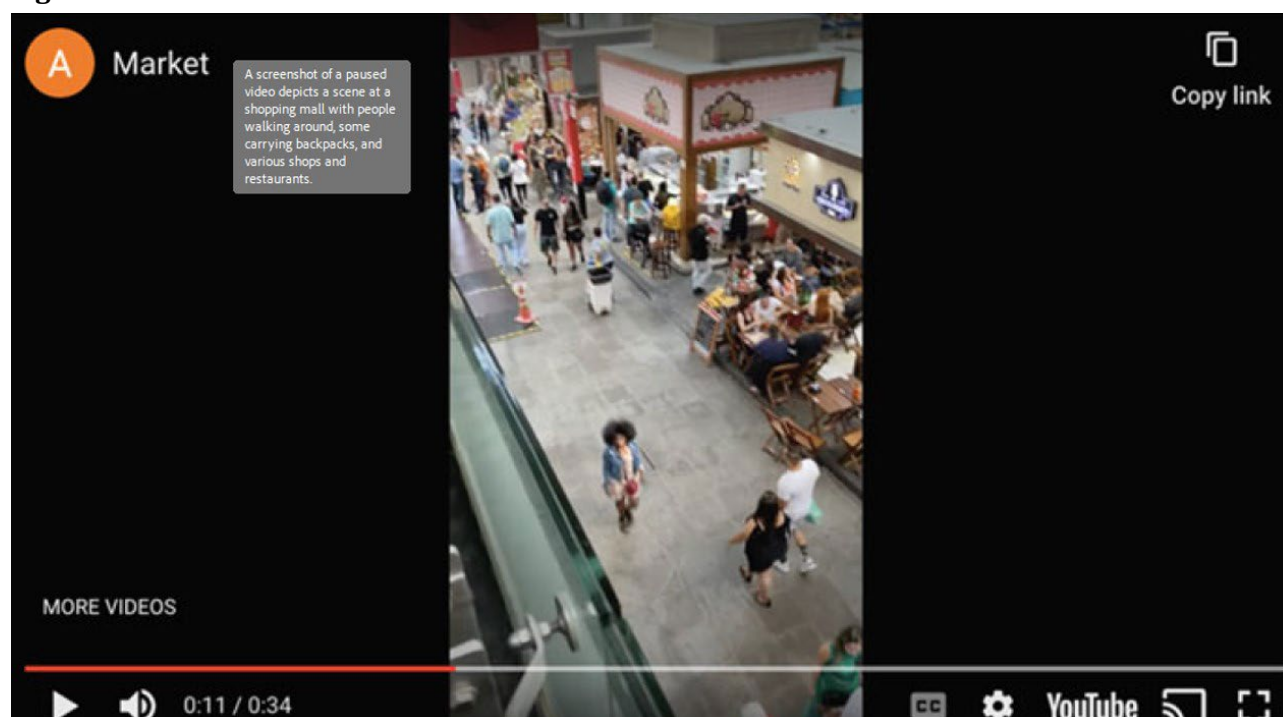


Source: authors' archive, 2025. Screen print of the *Padlet* application, with interactions and notes from the participants.

As already mentioned, during their stay in Brazil, the participants kept a blog and found other ways in which digital technologies could support their experiences (for example, using a translation app to choose what to eat from a menu). In this way, technologies were part of

their everyday experiences, helping them to find important information about the program, as well as stimulating connections between colleagues, capturing and sharing significant moments (Fig. 3), and reflections on their educational and intercultural experiences, which

Figure 3 - Video at “Mercadão”



Source: authors' archive, 2023. Video sharing the hustle and bustle of the Mercado Municipal Paulistano, known as “Mercadão”, famous among locals and tourists for its diversity of products and culinary offerings.

contributed to their learning about various aspects. Among their relationships with digital technologies, the following stood out: the creation, editing and publishing of a *Facebook* page by the entire New Zealand group; the use of various apps to communicate (e.g. *WhatsApp*, *Google Translate*, *Padlet*), get around (e.g. *Uber*), learn about Brazilian culture (e.g. a joint *Spotify* playlist of Brazilian songs), monitor their teaching and learning activities at the host university (e.g. *Moodle*), among others.

4.1. Choosing locations for visits

The notion of hybrid cultures (Canclini, 2005) invites reflections on situations in which extreme wealth and poverty coexist in society, something that is prevalent in the large urban centers of Latin America. In the Brazilian education system, this manifests itself through a diverse range of schools that coexist in cities like São Paulo: some of them have abundant access to various technologies and digital resources, while others are considered innovative, but with only a subtle digital presence; there are also environments with very scarce resources. So, the teachers from the two universities involved carefully selected five schools with different types of learning spaces, as well as organizing visits to two universities and various cultural venues, as described below:

a. Kindergarten, primary and secondary schools

Initially, the participants visited the EMEF Desembargador Amorim Lima⁷, which has as one of its main pedagogical characteristics the break with the traditional school space model, organized by single-cell classrooms, in which there is a group of students of a similar age group with a teacher at the head. It is thus characterized by having open learning spaces, due to the absence of walls between the classrooms, with the guiding principle of its Pedagogical Political Project being the promotion of student

autonomy, whose activities are based on questioning and individual study plans. We then visited the USP School of Education (EAFEUSP)⁸, located on the university campus in Butantã. This school is known for its democratic management and for the collective projects carried out by its teachers, especially those focused on diversity (Gender and Sexuality; Blackness; Reading and Writing Club; Individualized Assistance, among others), as well as being an important space for research and professional development for future teachers. During their visit to EAFEUSP, the undergraduates had the opportunity to give an English lesson, an action planned in collaboration with the teacher responsible for this curricular component at the institution.

The CEU Butantã⁹, visited by the participants, combines nursery and primary education with sports and cultural activities in an innovative project. It is worth remembering that this type of institution is characterized by the integration of Education, Culture, Sport and Architecture, including the involvement of the residents of the neighboring favela in the creative process, which promoted a sense of belonging and collective empowerment and resulted in the creation of a built environment for cultural and sporting activities not only for the students, but for the community in general (Ambrogi et al., 2023). Finally, the undergraduates visited the Centro de Educação e Cultura Indígena (CECI) and the Escola Estadual Indígena (EEI) Djekupe Amba¹⁰, both located in a Guarani indigenous village in Jaraguá, in the northern part of the city of São Paulo. The two schools cater for kindergarten, primary, and secondary school students in the region, developing educational activities that respect *Guarani Mbyá* indigenous education and culture, with

8 To find out more about the school, see: <https://www3.ea.fe.usp.br/>.

9 On this institution, see: <https://ceu.sme.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/unidade/ceu-butanta/>.

10 On these schools, see respectively: <https://educacao.sme.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/noticias/centro-de-educacao-e-cultura-indigena-cec-1/> and <https://www.escol.as/218970-djekupe-amba-arandy>.

7 More information can be found on the school's website: <https://amorimlima.org.br/>.

the aim of empowering the community through self-determination. In the case of the CECI, the educators are indigenous, with the exception of the principal and pedagogical coordinator.

b. Learning opportunities outside the school walls

In addition to the visits to formal educational institutions mentioned above, the program participants also had the opportunity to visit museums, art galleries, libraries and cultural centers. One of these visits was to USP's Museu Paulista, a history museum known locally as the Museu do Ipiranga due to its proximity to the Ipiranga River, where Emperor Pedro I formally proclaimed Brazil's independence from the Portuguese Crown in 1822. Built as a symbol of 19th-century opulence and São Paulo's growing status, the museum contains a vast collection of furniture, documents, and works of art. Another visit was to the Butantã Institute, one of Brazil's scientific centers and the country's main producer of immunobiologicals, used in vaccines, antitoxins, antivenoms and biopharmaceuticals. The institute is set in a large green area, with several museums and educational programs.

c. Seminars and round tables at Brazilian universities

The undergraduates also had the opportunity to take part in seminars and round tables given by Brazilian experts at FEUSP and the School of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences at the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), Guarulhos campus. These sessions addressed global and local educational issues, offering program participants the opportunity to learn more about the Brazilian educational system and the teacher education processes at these universities. These visits also provided a space for the students to compare their own reality with the one they were getting to know and to reflect on their experiences in their training processes, allowing them to understand the paths to a teaching career in both countries.

At USP, the undergraduates established contact with Pedagogy students and other undergraduates, starting with Padlet and continuing with cultural and educational visits. In addition, they organized meetings between them, establishing links and support in practical challenges during their stay in the city, thus constituting a very rich experience for students from both countries. The undergraduates also met two educators responsible for organizing the practicum and promoting connections between the university and the public schools. At UNIFESP, the participants interacted with teachers mainly in the humanities and with Brazilian undergraduates, thus providing another opportunity to contrast the theoretical and practical aspects of teacher education in Brazil with their experiences in New Zealand/Aotearoa.

After describing some of the main elements of this postdigital learning space, we now turn to the students' learning experiences, presenting the main themes that emerged from the research carried out.

5. (Self-)Formation across borders: analysis of reflections on the intercultural journey

The research carried out adopted a broad interpretation of the postdigital learning space, considering the combination of face-to-face and virtual domains, as well as the complex interaction between human and technological elements (Lamb et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier, Brazilian daily life is marked by contrasts (Canclini 2005). This means that, in a single day or in a matter of minutes, the undergraduates moved from a more sophisticated and innovative urban landscape to a rural and simple environment, or even to a landscape with only basic infrastructure. Therefore, the students experienced both material wealth on a highly developed scale and abject poverty, not only in the formal education system, but also in informal learning situations.

During the program, the student-teachers used digital technologies to connect and share their experiences in real time. This exchange involved different actors and multiple layers of learning and sharing. Not only did they communicate instantaneously through live sessions, but they also used platforms to document their blog and share reflections asynchronously - with friends and family at home, with other Massey University students and teachers, with new Brazilian friends and with the wider community. Before presenting the analysis of the three most recurrent themes in the undergraduates' reflections, it is important to reiterate the qualitative nature of the research and also to note that the findings concern a very specific group of participants, in a particular space and time.

5.1. Circles of conversation as learning spaces

The visit to EMEF Desembargador Amorim Lima, the first institution visited, left lasting impressions on the participants. This public school is renowned for its democratic and student-centred approach, and its hallmark is open learning spaces, i.e. classrooms without walls, as already mentioned. Participants were impressed to learn that the school was inspired by a visionary principal who removed walls to integrate the community. This was evident, for example, when Participant 2 commented that, more than changing the space, these types of actions created "open learning environments and that student action was at the forefront of their practices". Some participants related Amorim Lima's learning spaces to the notion of innovative learning environments, well known in the New Zealand/Aotearoa educational context (Benade and Jackson, 2020; Carvalho et al., 2020), where there are some institutions known for their use of active methodologies and digital tools in learning. However, even though changes in the school environment are also taking place in their country, the relationship between space and openness to dialogue

in Brazilian education was a topic that resurfaced in his reflections throughout the program (Participant 7).

In this sense, one pedagogical strategy that stood out for the program's participants was the "rodas de conversa" (circles of conversation), in which Brazilian students discussed school and social issues in a respectful rotation, showing the influence of Paulo Freire's (1974) work in some Brazilian schools. As discussed earlier, Freire emphasizes dialogue and the role of the student in the pedagogical process, often through debates involving students sitting in a circle (see Fig. 1). Thus, a recurring theme in the students' reports was the perception of the "progressive nature of education in the public schools" visited (Participant 1). Participant 4 noted that Brazilian students discussed "any local or international news" for 30 minutes a day. Participant 6 reflected on the high level of engagement during these discussions and how everyone "was passionate and also accepting of the beliefs and values of other *ākonga* (students)". Participant 4 pointed out that he was "surprised not only by the way the students debated controversial topics and openly disagreed with each other", but also by the fact that the teachers themselves also "encouraged open discussion and did not try to steer them towards a single opinion".

Another contribution from Participant 1 referred to seeing students in "total freedom" and that they not only "have the confidence to think for themselves, have a voice and be listened to by adults", but "are also free to create their own expectations and rules to follow at school". The visit to the Amorim Lima School also surprised the participants by the relative lack of digital technologies in the classrooms, in contrast to the prevalence of such devices in New Zealand/Aotearoa schools. Participants observed that students relied mainly on textbooks and compiled a comprehensive "script" that encompassed the content of an entire year. This contrasted with the digital technology-based learning experiences com-

mon in New Zealand/Aotearoa, where almost all students have access to digital devices and much of the work relies on platforms such as *Google Classroom*, which is considered fundamental especially as “digital technologies are now an essential component of New Zealand’s revamped curriculum” (Participant 2).

Participant 5 said that he intends to include student protagonism and openness to observed discussions in his teaching practice. Participant 3 highlighted the desire to create a learning environment where students talk more and debates are encouraged. Many of the reflections included questions about “how we could bring this to our [New Zealand/Aotearoa] classrooms?” (Participant 3) or promises to incorporate this strategy when he becomes a teacher, as Participant 4 said. Similarly, Participant 9 raised the question of whether characteristics of Brazilians ended up favoring this practice of children “expressing their personal opinions in schools”, adding that this was “something I would like to translate to New Zealand”.

Reflections on the circles of conversation resurfaced during the visit to FEUSP’s School of Application, when technical problems forced the participants to quickly reformulate their class activities. Instead of being discouraged, they changed their original plans and gathered their groups of students in a circle, in which meaningful discussions were held on the themes planned for the lesson and, in doing so, “used the Brazilian pedagogy of the circle of conversation” (Participant 2). In general, there was a feeling that the visits to schools, universities and informal contact with Brazilians had “expanded their pedagogical repertoire to take back to the classroom” with “lots of new ideas and strategies that I want to try out” (Participant 10).

5.2. Education, teacher education, and social transformation

During their visits to USP and UNIFESP, New Zealand and Brazilian students discussed teacher education and reflected on the pros

and cons of the educational systems in both countries. The New Zealand undergraduates, for example, found the discussions about their Brazilian colleagues’ practicum experiences at UNIFESP interesting. As part of their practicum activities at this institution, they are expected to propose a change to the host school based on their observations, in order for it to be implemented, as Participant 2 points out. This was perceived as a strong contrast to the practicum model in place in New Zealand/Aotearoa, “where you are expected to observe, but not criticize” (Participant 3).

After the visit to UNIFESP, the participants seemed to realize that the one-year intensive teacher education course was rushed and inauthentic, as it did not offer enough time to address the “real issues” that need to be changed in New Zealand/Aotearoa education (Participant 2). These open discussions with the Brazilian students helped the participants to critically reflect on their own learning experiences, leading them to identify the inconsistencies and incompatibilities that exist in their course’s training project (Carvalho and Yeoman, 2018). An example of this is the contrast between the advocacy of student-centered teaching, in which critical reflection is encouraged in New Zealand/Aotearoa education, and their own practical experiences as undergraduates, considering that their course “is very intensive and takes place in a short space of time”. In this respect, Participant 7 notes that perhaps “it can’t be student-centered for us, because we can’t always discuss our experiences”.

Another observation about the differences between the two countries was made by Participant 1, who noticed a significant difference between the students in Brazilian public schools, especially those visited in the city of São Paulo, and what is normally observed in New Zealand/Aotearoa with regard to the level of “autonomy and social knowledge”. Among the participants, there was a sense that the Brazilian students had the autonomy to express their opinions and criticisms and were

encouraged to reflect, in contrast to the New Zealand children, who, according to Participant 2, are always “on their phones and more concerned about what’s happening on social media”. However, this participant also saw connections with the goals and aspirations of the New Zealand Curriculum to develop lifelong essential skills, where students need to “live and learn today and in the future” (Ministry of Education, 2007)¹¹. For Participant 2, they were able to see in Brazil how to develop a

practice focused on “student protagonism and learning autonomy”, as advocated in their country’s curriculum guidelines. Another fact that caught his attention was that the group was guided at the Amorim Lima School by the students themselves, rather than the school leadership or teachers.

The visit to the indigenous schools mentioned above, which are located on *Guarani Mbyá* ancestral land (Figs. 4 and 5), also generated reflections on education and the need

Figure 4 - Internal area of the Guarani indigenous school EEI Djekupe Amba Arandy ©2023.



Source: authors' archive, 2023.

Figure 5 - Outside the Guarani indigenous school Centro de Educação e Cultura Indígena (CECI) © 2023.



Source: authors' archive, 2023.

11 For more information, see <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Key-competencies>. Accessed on January 19, 2025.

for social transformation. During the visit, mediated by indigenous educators, they learned about the challenges faced by the community in maintaining their land, feeding their students and families, as well as preserving their own language and culture. This triggered criticism of the complex effects of colonial legacies and the impact of differences in the distribution of material wealth in the world, without disregarding the fact that, in places of deep poverty (Canclini, 2005), it is possible to find intangible riches in terms of relationships and identity. Figures 4 and 5 capture the material resources around both schools. Despite recognizing that the community was “not rich in terms of money”, Participant 6 saw abundance in knowledge and culture, which gave him a “new perspective on teaching and the education system”. Similarly, Participant 8 noted that although “these families seemed very underprivileged” from the point of view of a middle-class New Zealander, “there was a lot of happiness in their space”. Participant 8 spoke of being heartbroken and “incredibly emotional” at the level of poverty of the indigenous group, “hiding in the corner of the classroom because he couldn’t hold back his tears”, but also commented on how they “realized that they are very rich in their cultural identity and incredibly happy with their lives” (Participant 8). Despite recognizing that “the mana¹² and attitude of the whole community was incredible to see”, Participant 9 commented that “it was heartbreaking to see the living conditions of this community.”

5.3. Inclusive education and different perspectives on the colonial past

The visit to the Ipiranga Museum generated reflections on politics, education, and decolonization in Brazil and New Zealand/Aotearoa. This included questions about how the participants (mostly of European descent) were “teaching *ākonga* [students] *Māori* the way we learn and not how they learn best” and the

need to tailor their “teaching considering each student’s way of learning” (Participant 4). In New Zealand/Aotearoa, a single *Māori* word - *ako* - encompasses the concepts of learning and teaching, so both processes are inseparable and therefore knowledge and new understandings occur through learning and teaching simultaneously (Macfarlane, 2015; Napan et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the participants’ experiences in Brazil reinforced the *Māori* principles of *ako* in education, with learning being a dynamic, two-way process in which teachers and students contribute equally with their ideas and insights to enrich the learning journey. Such sentiments were expressed in Participant 1’s reflection on the need to ensure that “young people (are) being educated about other cultures and the political history of a society, so that more empathy is generated to accept differences”.

At the museum, the undergraduates were impressed by how the multimedia exhibits created counterpoints to the racist narratives portrayed in the original paintings and sculptures (Fig. 6). Participants praised the proposal to keep the works on display, but with information that encourages debate about their function in colonial society. Inspired by the political stance of this museum and reflecting on the history of New Zealand/Aotearoa, one undergraduate emphasized the need for education to address and confront the way *Māori* were treated rather than “being ashamed and silent as a nation” about the ongoing impacts of this on indigenous people today (Participant 1).

Questioning the different perspectives of history and its link to power structures is essential to understanding the relations between colonizers and indigenous peoples in New Zealand/Aotearoa. Participant 7 was particularly surprised by “the way the negative aspects of Brazilian history were displayed and commented on” rather than being “hidden or not mentioned”. For him, this would be “something New Zealand could improve on, especially with regard to responsibility around *Te Tiriti*”. As mentioned earlier, *Te Tiriti*, also

¹² *Māori* for spiritual power.

known as the *Treaty of Waitangi*, refers to the agreement drawn up between representatives of the British Crown and *Māori iwi and hapū* in

1840 (Archives New Zealand, 2023) which is fundamental to understanding the country's history and its constitution.

Figure 6 - Detail of the multimedia exhibition



Source: authors' archive, 2023. Detail of a multimedia display with a contemporary counter-narrative of Pedro Américo's iconic 1888 oil painting "Independência ou Morte!", commemorating Brazil's official independence in 1822.

In addition to the way in which cultural facilities in Brazil have dealt with their colonial past, another approach that caught the New Zealand participants' attention was the concern for inclusion in different ways, and not just in educational venues. At the Butantã Institute, for example, there was a mixture of visual representations, models and written explanations, all accompanied by English translations, highlighting this concern. For the undergraduates, this sought to cater for a diverse range of students, providing flexibility in accessing information "through visual, auditory and kinesthetic representations" (Participant 2). They also noted that the Ipiranga Museum had "a brilliant solution so that the blind could see the paintings; they had a marble engraving of the painting with an explanation in Braille" (Participant 4).

Participant 2 pointed out that the collaborative learning experiences at the Microbiology Museum are in line with the New Zealand

teaching guidelines in the *Tapasā*¹³ document. This document emphasizes, for example, the importance of using group work with these students because, for cultural reasons, they prefer this type of activity. Participant 5 drew attention to the "unisex toilets and valuing diversity" in one of the schools visited. In addition to the "unisex toilets and LGBTQIA+ representations" around the walls of the school, Participant 7 also considered the existence of "heterogeneous and inclusive classes" to be relevant, as they seek to ensure that all classes, ethnicities, abilities and identities are taught (Fig. 7).

¹³ *Tapasā: he Cultural Competence Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners* is a document produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, which aims to provide teachers with a Pacific learner's perspective on the learning processes of Pacific learners. *Tapasā* is a Samoan term, which can be loosely translated as a navigational compass. The full document can be found at <https://teachingcouncil.nz/resource-centre/tapasā/#overview> and <https://pasifika.tki.org.nz/Tapasā>, accessed on January 19, 2025.

Figure 7 - Detail of the tactile miniature and the Braille display with an explanation of Pedro Américo's iconic 1888 oil painting - supporting multimedia narratives foreground an inclusive approach to learning in the museum for visually impaired visitors © 2023.



Source: authors' archive, 2023.

From the experiences of the undergraduates over three weeks, São Paulo was portrayed as a space that was both real and surreal, hospitable and hostile, functional and flawed, modern and old-fashioned, digital and analog. Their reflections show attempts to make sense of this multidimensional landscape, which always seemed to resist rigid or stereotyped categorizations (Canclini, 2005). Interpreting this ambivalent hybridity may be the only way to understand how an unequal society builds democratic schools (Freire,

1974). How can severe poverty coexist with abundant generosity? How can high crime rates be accompanied by extreme acts of kindness? How could teachers feel energized while working until 11pm? How could an LGBTQIA+ person feel safer in a foreign land with a Catholic tradition than in a developed Anglo-Saxon nation? How could digital technology seem seamless, running many times faster than in New Zealand/Aotearoa, even though it was powered by such a chaotic electrical cable system (Fig. 8)?

Figure 8 - Photo showing the precariousness and danger of the electric-but-functional poles in São Paulo.



Source: authors' archive, 2023. Photo taken by participants during the São Paulo Gay Pride Parade.

6. Final considerations

This article explores the learning experiences reported by a group of New Zealand undergraduates during their trip to Brazil to get to know the schools and cultural institutions of the city of São Paulo. Throughout this educational journey, the undergraduates encountered many disparities and inequalities, seeing and experiencing hybridity as a mixture of diverse material and immaterial elements that, together, have been producing new ways of living in cities full of contrasts and contradictions. In order to understand the entangled relationships between the social, the spatial, the digital and the face-to-face in education (Lamb et al., 2022), we used Canclini's (2005) notion of cultural hybridity, which made it possible to understand the paradoxes that mark the big cities of Latin America and thus help answer

the main questions that arose during our three-week stay in São Paulo. How do people learn to navigate postdigital learning spaces in a city that is ethnically mixed but historically racist, economically prosperous but poverty-stricken, culturally welcoming but with high crime rates, within the socio-technical structures of a city like São Paulo?

These issues have led the program's learning space to be seen as a set of elements articulated with human and non-human variables, highlighting the influence of interconnections between the digital, the material, the biological and the social (Jandrić et al., 2018). The program was designed to provide rich intercultural experiences, fostering new perceptions of landscapes, ideas and people. Digital supported and challenged the undergraduates, helping them

to capture images, reflections and navigate the new landscape. Importantly, while making new connections with Brazil and Brazilians, the participants also had to keep up with the lectures and classes of their course in New Zealand, debating issues specific to their country. As a result, they had the opportunity to experience, at the same time, face-to-face teaching processes - in physical classrooms - and online learning environments (MacKenzie et al., 2021), in a training program across national borders, permeated by multi-layered cultural and civic expectations and feelings of belonging.

For this reason, the student-teachers constantly compared their training experiences in New Zealand/Aotearoa with what they were experiencing in Brazil. This was evident in many of their reflections, in which the significance of the “circles of conversation” was highlighted. Introduced as a pedagogical approach during one of the visits to the schools, this pedagogical strategy became a recurring theme among them and was the subject of much of the reflection in the blogs. This is because this pedagogical strategy encourages dialogue, questioning and the involvement of students in collaborative problem-solving, rather than a traditional top-down pedagogy, emphasizing the political dimension of education (from internal school management to global conflicts), which in turn led the undergraduates to (re) think about the role of educational systems.

These non-hierarchical, open, and often political discussions helped the undergraduates to draw connections between the social, political, and economic dimensions of education and to openly share their perceptions of the conditions and contradictions that seem to influence education in the socio-political contexts of New Zealand/Aotearoa and Brazil. In this way, the graduates not only had access to the notion of the “circle of culture” in the work of Paulo Freire (1974), but also experienced its impact on the Brazilian educational scenario in practice. As a result, they were able to understand deeper issues relating to educa-

tion as a universal right and linked to political processes, and thus began to question their role as teachers for the critical construction of just and democratic societies (Roberts, 2017).

These reflections suggest that, over the course of their stay in São Paulo, the students were developing what can be called intercultural competence (Byram and Feng, 2006), by using values and beliefs from Brazilian culture to critically examine their country. Intercultural development requires reflexivity (Bennett, 2008), and this was observed in several posts, in which participants seemed to recognize and challenge some of their own norms and prejudices as they engaged with new and diverse cultural contexts. In this way, they were able to consider new perspectives, observe and experience how the learning activity unfolds in a different cultural context, while at the same time sharing their own views and questioning elements of their own educational experiences as both students and future teachers. In doing so, the undergraduates became actively involved in what could be considered a post-digital version of the circles of conversation, which they saw as an innovative aspect of the educational practices witnessed in the schools and non-formal education institutions visited during their stay in São Paulo.

Understanding the links between education and socio-economic and political aspects is crucial to combating inequalities in society in general, but it is also important to provide a convivial atmosphere in which such debate can take place. The New Zealand undergraduates seemed to recognize the potential of “circles of conversation” not only as a space for students to interact creatively and autonomously (Illich, 1973), but also as a fruitful pedagogical strategy that they could adopt in their countries. In this way, the undergraduates were not only learning strategies for teaching future generations, but were also developing their ability to grasp the complexities of educational systems and their relationship with socio-economic and political constraints.

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