

# Critical Rights Literacy as Foundational Learning: Lessons from Indigenous Migrant Communities

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## Summary

This paper highlights the importance of critical rights literacy (CRL) for migrant communities, drawing from three Guatemalan and Mexican examples. Civil society actors incorporate foundational learning to empower Indigenous migrant communities with movement and access rights. The paper contends that CRL is a vital aspect of foundational learning, showcasing trust and empathy as integral to its realisation among these communities.

## Keywords

Capabilities  
Central America  
Critical rights literacy (CRL)  
Indigenous communities  
Migration

Millions of people on the move lack awareness of their human rights during their migratory journeys. International rights frameworks do not align with their lived realities, particularly where shifting border regimes threaten basic rights, including the right to asylum and related protections. Building foundational knowledge through community-based dialogic processes,<sup>1</sup> trust, and empathy is crucial. Indigenous people, due to the absence of safe and legalised routes, are often forced to migrate via irregular channels. This paper considers the foundational importance of critical rights literacy (CRL) for Indigenous children and adults on the move. It offers illustrative examples of how Indigenous migrant communities in Central America are pioneering the promotion of CRL and demonstrates how the wider international community might learn from these efforts.

The paper draws on three examples of how civil society actors have worked with Indigenous migrant communities through foundational learning in Guatemala and Mexico to illustrate how CRL centres on values of trust and empathy. It illustrates the co-constructing of understandings of human rights through a dialogic process (Freire, 1970).<sup>2</sup> It also draws on “cosmopolitan critical literacy” (Vellino, 2004), an approach that is used to acknowledge and challenge the uneven global power distributions in how rights are conceived. We consider how people on the move respond to attacks on their rights through networks of solidarity in which they share foundational knowledge for survival in circumstances that are often violent and unstable.

The UNICEF and World Bank-led Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning (2022) defines foundational learning as “basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills such as

socio-emotional skills”. CRL seeks to enable people on the move to more fully understand the processes through which they may actualise their rights and advocate for themselves and their communities. It involves a collaborative learning process whereby individuals and their wider networks come to better understand, analyse, and challenge oppressive power structures and injustices that underpin legal and political systems by critically engaging with the broader social, political, historical, and economic factors that close down their access to and exercise of rights (Abu Moghli, 2020; Keet, 2015; Vissandjée et al., 2017). This approach can enable migrant communities to engage in collective action to claim their rights and promote greater equity and social justice.

Critical awareness among displaced populations needs to be renewed across different generations, across time and space, and across different stages of the migration cycle. Approaches to CRL involve knowledge and action that transcend individual learners; they can be shared across borders and communities to provide a ‘flexible’ foundation for learning that responds to people’s lived experiences and everyday needs.

For rights, CRL is a foundational competency upon which other knowledges can be built. For pedagogy, CRL can be transformational, developing basic competencies for the learner and generating and sharing knowledge within communities for collective capabilities to [claim rights](#). Critical literacy and critical pedagogy, after Freire (1970), and ecological literacy for David Orr (1992) and others, as discussed elsewhere in this special issue, describe pedagogies for social action.

Understandings and praxes of CRL as foundational within Indigenous migrant communities allow an expansion of foundational learning in content, target, and scope. The short case studies in this essay illustrate the centrality of nurturing emotional and relational skills, including trust and empathy—skills that, we argue, are foundational capabilities alongside reading and numeracy. As Freire argued, critique itself is a foundational capability. The ability to read the world, not just the word, is a prerequisite for all actions to fight effectively for rights. Martha Nussbaum (2002) and Amartya Sen (2003) considered capabilities to be the real freedoms that people have to do and be what they most value.<sup>3</sup> The following case studies show how CRL is integrated into Indigenous foundational learning as an approach to the “capability expansion” Nussbaum and Sen called for—that is, to widen the freedoms people have to exercise their rights.

### **The Citizen’s School for Human Rights Guatemala**

The Network of Community Defenders for Health Rights ([REDC SALUD](#)) is a grassroots Indigenous organisation with over 180 members in 35 rural municipalities. Together with

the Centre for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems Guatemala ([CEGSS](#)), REDC SALUD co-designs and implements the Citizen’s School for Human Rights—*Escuela Ciudadana de Derechos Humanos*. The school blends Freire’s *educação popular*<sup>4</sup> approach to make learning participatory and empowering using Indigenous knowledge practices of “leading by example”, in which the teacher must be a practitioner of the knowledge and the skills they convey. The school uses Indigenous storytelling methods to co-develop rights-literacy content, which is shared as audio files for mobile phones. Recently, the school utilised knowledge from these processes to create animated videos and infographics that inform communities about their rights to the birth registry and non-discrimination, including the right not to be forcibly evicted from their land. The common assumption that all Guatemalans speak Spanish limits their access to mother tongue interpreters and resources. All information, in both material and digital formats, has consequently been translated into the seven Indigenous languages spoken within the target territories.

The Citizen’s School for Human Rights empowers vulnerable communities to advocate for protection, education, and wellbeing in their communities to tackle some of the root causes in displacement. In the light of their digitisation and ease of access via mobile phone, resources are also available to people on the move, including internally displaced individuals, rural-to-urban migrants and deported migrants or returnees. CRL is integrated into the foundational learning curriculum as both a capability and a competence that can be measured as part of the monitoring of learning outcomes.

### **IMUMI’s Focus on Transnational Families Mexico**

For CRL to be seen as foundational, there must be broad agreement and acceptance that literacy in critical rights is important for all—citizens and non-citizens. It must be an outcome of the political contract, rather than the education system, and fought for in the public space. It also needs to be taught in a structured way through formal education and offered as *educação popular* for communities, including workers and migrants. The civil society organisation [IMUMI](#) (Institute for Women in Migration—El Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración) is working towards establishing CRL as a capability and competence in Mexico across different sectors of society. The foundational realisation here is the commonality of cause with migration and other rights-based struggles, including gender equity and working with victims of criminality or violence, with a focus on solidarity, empathy, and trust. De-criminalising migrant narratives is an important part of this work.

IMUMI conducts research and case documentation on the impacts of restrictive immigration policies and practices in the USA on transnational families and empowers families

to mitigate the challenges they face when members have been deported or returned to Mexico. The social contract is transitional in nature and stems from a bottom-up perspective based on migrants' lived experiences, as well as on Mexico's local, national, and international rights obligations. IMUMI's work involves training government, academia, and civil society organisations on the needs of transnational families and helping families reunite and (re)integrate into Mexican society. Current work includes responding to the situation of children of migrant parents who are born in destination or transit countries. Protection gaps include birth registration, vaccination, and health care, as well as access to legal documents. IMUMI also works in shelters to respond to the needs of pregnant women and young mothers.

IMUMI are building "pop-up" education centres for migrants in transit, including in shelters or closed detention centres, to respond to the isolation of children and young people and the specific challenges in gaining access to knowledge about and exercising their rights. Since children often lack access to formal schooling, these CRL interventions often incorporate broader curricula content that integrates foundational literacy and numeracy skills with awareness raising and critique of rights. While informal in scope, pop-up schools often temporarily take the place of formal education and are better placed and better able to respond to the needs of migrant children. This is particularly true, given the challenges in accessing local schools, travel limitations, and inadequate provision for Indigenous learners' language and cultural needs. Successful CRL rests on access to technology that enables children to connect and "problem solve" with their communities and families. It also enables civil society groups to work meaningfully with and "accompany" (Glockner et al., 2022) individuals over space and time. IMUMI is working to provide migrant communities with technology, including mobile phones and access to the internet, so that they can empower transnational families to collectively advocate for themselves.

### **The School of Happiness TV Guatemala**

While the digital language of choice for many Indigenous migrants from Guatemala and Mexico is Spanish, the *Ki'kotemal* TV project, which is part of the Mayan Conservancy, seeks to realise the potential of new technologies to foster language learning and exchange within the diaspora. This includes, for example, transmitting cultural knowledge and practices around food.

The startup project *Quj Ch'au pa K'iche* embraces the 22 Mayan languages in Guatemala. The school has been working on *Ki'kotemal Tijobal* (Ki'che for School of Happiness) since 2014. *Ki'kotemal Tijobal* aims to reach children who are forced to leave their communities and denied opportunities

to learn their ancestral languages. Programmes emphasise ancestral practices and values. They provide young people and Indigenous elders with the resources to promote their traditions and cultures in transformative ways. It also utilises social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Soundcloud. According to *Ki'kotemal Tijobal*:

*At the Ki'kotemal School, we are creating spaces where students can ask questions, recover the past, and meet previous generations. It has been our joy to hear some young people declare publicly, "I understand better what it means to be Maya" and "Now I can proudly say who I am, where I come from, and where I decide to go".*

Mother-tongue literacy and instruction are not only a right; from a pedagogical perspective, much subsequent learning depends on foundational knowledge in the mother tongue, encompassing a wide vocabulary, folklore, fluency, and comfort in speaking. For Indigenous movements, in which language, land, and culture are often key elements of political struggle, foundational education skills that include pride in one's language, culture, and love for the land coincide with political identity.

The *Ki'kotemal* TV programmes are grounded in people's lived experiences of poverty, violence, and migration while promoting reflexive awareness of the socio-political roots of these conditions. This foundational learning empowers communities to create collective media tools advancing their rights and fostering a sense of pride and self-confidence in their identities as human beings.

### **Conclusion**

The three case studies discussed in this paper exemplify how CRL is being integrated into Indigenous foundational learning. Foundational literacy means different things in and across diverse contexts. For Indigenous people on the move, CRL represents a foundational capability and a competence for realising rights that help secure just outcomes for migrant individuals and communities. Access to intellectual and digital resources is crucial to the realisation of CRL among Indigenous migrant communities, yet it is typically severely constrained for those in refugee camps, detention centres, and shelters. CRL focuses on the interconnectivity and solidarity praxes of communities that are historically subjected to rights violations and marginalisation—whether in their spaces of origin, in transit, or at their destination—to provide a means for remaining connected to and embedded in their home cultures through building community and affirming Indigenous subjectivities. As Potyguara and Montechiare's article (elsewhere in this special issue) indicates, valuing what Indigenous communities consider important knowledge includes the sharing of cultural heritage and the learning of Indigenous languages.

CRL encompasses people-based pedagogies that are mobile and dynamic, aligning with the fluidity of Indigenous people's lives, as well as place-based pedagogies, wherein tribal land, place, and "land" identity are fundamental for struggles. CRL focuses on participatory critical pedagogies that are shaped by bottom-up approaches. It aims to understand and respond to the rights violations of Indigenous peoples who are commonly minoritised, illegalised, and discriminated against on grounds of their race, class, and migrant identities.

The commitment to building solidarity, particularly among host populations, presents a central and accumulating challenge for CRL—specifically with the growing number of people on the move as a result of climate change and conflict. This requires a continuous reckoning with the dominant ideas about foundational learning and education, and with the economic, political, and social realities that shape these dominant ideas.

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#### Endnotes

1. In addition to being widely used in pedagogy and especially critical rights, (see García-Carrión et al. (2020). Implications for social impact of dialogic teaching and learning. *Educational Psychology*, 11. Retrieved from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00140/full#main-content>), dialogical processes are also increasing used for working with people in distress. See <https://www.dialogicpractice.net/dialogic-practice/about-dialogic-practice/>
2. For a useful discussion of Freire's dialogical pedagogy, see Yi-Huang Shi (2018). Rethinking Paulo Freire's Dialogic pedagogy and its implications for teaching. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1179672.pdf>
3. See Endnote ii on Sen and Nussbaum to Cin et al.'s "Lost in PISA-lation" elsewhere in this special issue.
4. Paulo Freire's term *educação popular* (popular education) is understood as popular, rather than populist, in the sense that it is "rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people; overtly political and critical of the status quo; and committed to progressive social and political change." For a fuller account of the movement today, see: <http://www.rizoma-freireano.org/articles-1414/the-international-popular-education-network>

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