ForeWord Reviews

EDUCATION

Schools in the Forest: How Grassroots Education Brought Political Empowerment to the Brazilian Rainforest

Denis Heyck
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Disenfranchised communities under attack and struggling for survival, using barely literate teachers, were foundational components of the phenomenal and highly successful schools in the rainforest of Acre, Brazil. Loyola University of Chicago's Professor Denis Heyck's *Schools in the Forest: How Grassroots Education Brought Political Empowerment to the Brazilian Rainforest* provides an in-depth sociological examination of how those schools came into being, the difficult circumstances surrounding their inception, and their empowering effects on the communities who developed and attended them.

Projeto Seringueiro (Project Rubber Tapper) began as a grassroots response by native populations to "development," which for them took the form of deforestation and the destruction of their communities. In response, the local rubber tappers forged a desperate yet highly organized and courageous political movement to salvage their livelihoods, communities, and local environment. The schools became an integral component of that movement and were, at their inception in 1981, created to teach relevant literacy and mathematical skills to their adult students. Community members were trained as teachers, with the native environment and culture valued and used as vantage points from which to view and examine the greater world. Projeto Seringueiro subsequently went through many changes and incarnations, officially ending in 2008.

Written in an academic style, the first half of the book offers a very detailed social, historical, and political backdrop for the personal interviews in the later portion. The reflections and insights by people who played significant roles in Projeto Seringueiro bring it to life for the reader, and inspire awe at the magnitude of what was accomplished.

While Heyck doesn't use the schools as a cautionary tale of what may happen when a movement becomes incorporated into mainstream culture (as happened with the schools), she does provide examples of latent functions that occurred as a result of that incorporation. The author also discusses the present-day support offered to the seringueiros and other native

communities not available at the project's birth by various organizations and groups.

Flying in the face of current American educational and political trends, *Schools in the Forest* reminds one of the potentially empowering effects of education on individuals and communities when the voices, needs, and participation of those being "educated" are actually heard and addressed. Anyone interested in grassroots social organizing or progressive education will certainly find this book well worth their time.

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