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The perpetuation of silence in face of Brazilian racial inequality: Subsides for transformations in school practices

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Abstract

This research seeks to understand how a state school in the countryside of São Paulo state acts on the issue of ethno-racial relations provided for by Law no. 10.639/2003 for Brazilian education. Through an ethnographic case study, we sought to investigate actions to combat racism in the final years of elementary school. Data collection included Participant observations and interviews with professional educators. The results indicated the school community's unpreparedness for the implementation of the law and the prevention of situations of racial violence against black students. It is concluded that silence is being maintained in the face of racial inequality in the school studied.

Keywords

basic school education; education law; students' needs.

O silêncio diante da desigualdade racial brasileira: subsídios para transformações nas práticas escolares

Resumo

A atual pesquisa busca compreender como uma escola estadual do interior paulista atua diante da temática das relações étnico-raciais prevista pela Lei nº 10.639/2003 para a educação brasileira. Por meio de um estudo de caso etnográfico, buscou-se investigar as ações de combate ao racismo nos anos finais do ensino fundamental. Foram realizadas observações participantes e entrevistas com profissionais educadores. Os resultados indicaram o despreparo da comunidade escolar para a implementação da lei e para a prevenção de situações de violência racial contra alunos negros. Conclui-se que está sendo mantido silêncio diante da desigualdade racial na escola estudada.

Palavras-chave

educação escolar básica; direito educacional; necessidades do educando.

La perpetuación del silencio frente a la desigualdad racial brasileña

Resumen

La presente investigación busca comprender cómo una escuela estatal del interior de São Paulo actúa sobre la cuestión de las relaciones étnico-raciales prevista por la ley nº 10.639/2003 para la educación brasileña. A través de un estudio de caso etnográfico, se buscó investigar acciones para combatir el racismo en los últimos años de la escuela primaria. Se llevaron a cabo observaciones de los participantes y entrevistas con

educadores profesionales. Los resultados indicaron la falta de preparación de la comunidad escolar para la implementación de la ley y para la prevención de situaciones de violencia racial contra estudiantes negros. Se concluye que se está guardando silencio ante la desigualdad racial en la escuela estudiada.

Palabras clave

educación escolar básica; ley educativa; necesidades del alumno.

1 Introduction

In Brazil, racism against black people is one of the main factors responsible for the perpetuation of social inequalities. Black people are most of the poorest people in the country and, compared with white people, they are the majority unemployed or underemployed, among the illiterate and the functional illiterate (DEVULSKY, 2021). Lima (2019), based on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), states that racism is a social construction with political ends and, as such, can be founded on discrimination based on color, religion, ethnicity, origin, and ancestry. Regarding racism against blacks, the author clarifies that, although racism does not depend on the presence of phenotypic characteristics, one of its most common and enduring forms of expression is founded on skin color. Consequently, there is the establishment of a gradation according to skin tone, which means that the darker it is, the farther away from an ideal of whiteness and the greater the intensity of discrimination.

It is worth highlighting that racist practices in a black person's life happen from an early age, because of that the debates about racism and formal education must be in evidence since young children already experience discrimination by color with their peers, teachers, and the school community as a whole, which lasts throughout the school cycle. Besides the different treatment between black and white students, the studies from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) showed that, in 2019, the exclusion of black, brown, and indigenous children and teenagers accounted for more than 70% of those out of school.

Though facing data concerning school inequality and its relation with race and ethnicity, Gomes (2019) states that there is a reluctance of the researchers of the education area in understanding young children, such as the early education ones since they foster interpretations and make actions based on racial differences and, usually,

those behaviors show negative stereotypes related to black people. The author affirms that the subordinate place occupied by black children on educational research and school routines, even in institutions where they are the majority of students such as popular and private nurseries, but located in poor neighborhoods, impact the curricula since they are not thought or guided to meet racial specificity and the presence of racism in education. In this scenario, Gomes (2019) also reports the low number of theoretical productions on the educational area concerning black children, as well as on the associations between children's education and race; educational public politics, race, and childhood; and anthropology, racial relationships and childhood. For the author, there is a persistent gap in scientific productions and the absence of black children perceived as subjects of rights (GOMES, 2019).

We should add the perception of Matos and França (2021), who point to the need for more empirical studies on the educational practices that inform about the knowledge of black people and that subsidize the reduction of racism and the construction of the identity of the subjects. One of the reasons is the school's responsibility concerning the building of the identity of black students, especially the identity focused on belonging to a group. Thus, the group, especially the school group, due to the number of hours and years the children and teenagers spend in school, is also a base for the building of social identity along with the beliefs and associated behaviors (DEL PRETTE, A.; DEL PRETTE, Z., 2003). In this sense, the building of social identity is related to the self-concept which could positively or negatively be influencing the perceptions of members of a group (DEL PRETTE, A.; DEL PRETTE, Z., 2003; MATOS; FRANÇA, 2021). From this perspective, it is argued that racism interferes negatively with the construction of the social identity of black children and teenagers.

Another contribution is the literature review of Carvalho and França (2019), who aimed to make a survey of what resources are employed by schools to confront racism. The authors state that, though there are scientific research and testimonies about racism, it continues to be denied in the Brazilian discourse, so the school is also responsible for assuming its social role in combating racism. The results showed that the number of articles with proposals for fighting racism is small, especially because no year was delimited for the search, but, on the other hand, the researchers used only three databases (CARVALHO; FRANÇA, 2019). This study is important for stating that

the number of studies about themes involving racism and education needs to be expanded locally and nationally, especially because many schools have antiracist actions that are not displayed in the literature making it impossible to systemize actions to confront them.

To fight racism against black people, Silva and Lúzio (2019) state the demand for an education based on human values and respecting the ethno-racial diversity. One of the social actions that influence the overcoming of historical frameworks of racial inequality imposed on African descendants involves a substantial change in the basic curriculum of education since new generations, by having access to a curriculum that is not mostly Eurocentric, would be able to recognize, understand and respect the role that African cultures had and still have in the construction of Brazilian social history; therefore, the authors reinforce the positive impact of implementing with quality - which is different from just adding content - the Teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, as determined by Law no. 10. 639, enacted in 2003, making the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory. After this change, the curriculum of Middle and High schools must include Africa and African History, black people's struggles in Brazil, black Brazilian culture, and black people's role in the formation of national society, rescuing the contribution of black people in the social, economic, and political areas pertinent to the history of Brazil, with this same content being taught throughout the school curriculum.

Though racism hits all the non-white population, the current study seeks to contribute to the literature concerning confronting and combating racism against black people since black Brazilians account for more than half of the population. Thus, this research aimed to identify the actions of a school in the countryside of São Paulo state for the implementation of Law no. 10.639/2003 concerning the education of ethnic-racial relations and to verify if the symbolic deprivations related to the black population are being fought efficiently, as proposed by the policy that aims to contribute to human and social development.

2 Methodology

The research, of qualitative and ethnographic type, was approved by the Municipal University Center of Franca's (Unifacef) Ethics Committee under consolidated

opinion no. 4,824,632. Next, we began the investigation in a state public school in the countryside of São Paulo state, in a town with approximately 360 thousand inhabitants. The school accepted the entrance of the researcher in the school after the delivery of the Letter of Consent by the researcher herself, which clarified that the theme of the research was the ethno-racial relationship in the final years of elementary school, with a focus on the black population. The document also contained how the data collection would be planned, which involved informal conversations with students, teachers and employees, participant observation, use of the reading room to have contact with the materials stored there, formal interviews with teachers and the pedagogical coordinator of the final years of elementary school and circulation through the school according to the school routine.

In the first stage of the research, the researcher started the participant observation with the minimum amount of four hours per week, based on the studies by André (2020) about ethnographic research in the educational area.

For André (2020), an ethnographic study in education uses techniques traditionally associated with ethnography, such as participant observation and interview. Observation favors a degree of interaction with the situation studied, affecting it and being affected by it, and interviews deepen questions or clarify observed problems.

In the first and second stages of the research, we selected the field diary for data collection. In the third stage, we used interviews that were recorded and later transcribed. The choice of the interviewees was not random. Two criteria were used to select the participants: (1) teachers of Artistic Education, Brazilian Literature and History, considering that, in these areas, the content related to Afro-Brazilian History and Culture should be taught, especially, according to the Law no. 10.639/2003; (2) the inclusion of the teacher who, at the moment, taught the Life Project subject, suggested by the pedagogical coordinator who explained that the said teacher was a reference of the ethno-racial relations in the school. The interviews with the selected social actors included: a) their knowledge of the “National Curricular Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture”; b) identifying episodes of racism on school routine; c) development of works about ethno-racial relations and antiracist actions in the school; d) the support of the school to work

ethno-racial themes and the teacher's role in the classroom considering their theoretical knowledge.

Data analysis was based on the phenomenological approach. Graças (2000) states that, when considering this reference on a methodological path, one starts from the subjectivity of the discourse, working with experiences that arise from the thinking and acting of the subjects. The author points out that the subject's account reveals how he perceives himself as being in the world and the meaning he attributes to the situations in which he is involved. To this end, the use of surveys allows the researcher to apprehend meanings, which will later be structured and understood. Regarding the subjects that participate in this interaction with the researcher, they may have access to their own being since human beings are able to become aware of things, of the other, and of himself through the embodiment of subjectivity, which is facilitated when there is a dialogue between individuals, that is, in intersubjectivity.

Given all the material collected, we organized it around three axes of analysis, which will be presented in the research results.

3 Results and discussion

The first axis, named "scenes from everyday school life", shows the school from the researcher's perception as a participant observer and her descriptions in the field diary. In this part, we enter the school's daily life and its dynamics, as proposed by André (2020), as well as what is provided by the physical space and material resources of the investigated school. During the analysis, the scenes were selected and fully imported from the field diary:

Scene 1

A black student is frequently dodging not to be pushed or touched by a light-skin white student. The black student verbalizes many times how uncomfortable he is, but the white student thinks it is funny and continues. The girls, of a big group of white students, invite the black student to stay near them. The leader of the girl group says the joke is over. Next, the black student 'safely' sits with the girls but does not engage in conversation with them. Another white student approaches and the two white boys start to push one another. However, they establish a boundary only with their looks. Differently from what happened with the black student, who, despite the verbalizations, the physical touches did not stop. Most of the times, they only threaten to push one another, but only with the looks they decide that there will be no touches. [Arrival time / Cafeteria].

Scene 2

I found a group of 7th-grade students, two black and two white. The two black students pushed the white students, and the white students pushed the black students. This dynamic was not interfered by any other students or employees and the group kept this behavior during all the school break. This same group was seen in the following weeks. The formation was the same and sometimes there were pushing or verbal aggressions, always two against two. [Bigger patio during the break].

Scene 3

The Brazilian History teacher started a dialogue with another teacher: 'Today's class is about the indigenous seminar. Ah! I am not in the mood. The students talk a lot during this class; they are not interested in the theme, you know?' [ironic tone]. The other teacher answered laughing: 'I can imagine it'. Both stand up after the bell rang. [Teachers' room].

In the first scene, it is possible to observe that the black body was invaded without consent. This body game is a manifestation of racist stereotypes that are present as central elements of the social and psychic history of Western nations, culminating in a series of conscious and unconscious actions of a subtle nature that express dislike for racial minorities, while reproducing the oppression of one group over the other (MOREIRA, 2020). It is possible to highlight the social and colonial imaginary has determined who is a citizen by right and who is not and, within this logic of racial violence, there are those who have no right to their own body and to their physical and mental integrity. When comparing the way the white student changed his behavior in front of another white student, we point out the existence of discriminatory treatment legitimated in the school context, which has reproduced structural racism through its institutional apparatus. The different treatment between students is one of the aspects that determine completely different experiences between black and white people during their schooling.

Concerning the second scene, it is worth questioning the actions of the school when facing these daily situations and how much it recognizes the expressions of violence, including racial violence since there are two groups historically demarcated in different ways and with unequal opportunities for social inclusion and access to justice. Thus, it is necessary that the school community receives the students based on their diversity, but also prepared to act in the face of ethnic-racial conflicts because these will inevitably arise since the school is part of a structurally racist society, but the conflicts themselves can be used as educational resources to confront racism.

Regarding the third scene, it should be discussed how the teachers approach the study of ethno-racial relations and how much they value it within the school curriculum. It should also be discussed how the expression “*I’m not in the mood*” has appeared in the classroom and the teacher’s performance, especially before a subject named Indigenous Seminar. For Rocha (2011), a citizenship-generating education requires the school to review values and standards, positioning itself politically and pedagogically in favor of the citizen it intends to form. However, while the main learning agent of the educational system does not become aware and take responsibility for discriminatory pedagogical practices, there will be no effective anti-racist actions capable of developing positive attitudes and values regarding Brazilian ethno-racial diversity.

The second axis, organized from the complete reading of the material - field diary and interviews answers - five categories were formed, established according to meanings, as proposed by phenomenological analysis.

I would not talk about color – The myth of racial democracy

To begin with, I would not talk about color. Never. There is no color. Do you see that black boy over there? I say that I don’t know, I didn’t see. I answer that it’s a boy, a human being. I don’t see color. In other words, to begin with, we have to stop making color evident. The more we highlight it, the stronger it gets. Do you want an example? Is there anything worse than quotas? I am totally against it. It is absurd. (Artistic Education teacher, final years of middle school / Interview).

Well, here in Brazil, the culture is very diverse. There are many races, cultures; the miscegenation is very big here and, thanks to all this, all these cultures, we have what our culture calls the Brazilian way. (Life Project Teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

In this category, we approach the myth of racial democracy, one of the main maintainers of Brazilian racism, and the vision of harmony and cordiality among racial groups attributed to the concept of miscegenation, which are *obstacles* to social demands. According to Carneiro (2001), the myth of racial democracy aims to *deracialize* society by defending miscegenation and historically lends itself to disguising social inequalities. It is argued, based on the myth of racial democracy, that differences were hidden and that the establishment of supposedly harmonious relations between blacks and whites was propagated, and this myth was immediately absorbed by school institutions.

She is not even black – From the invisibility of the black population to the erasure of the ethno-racial theme as mechanisms for perpetuating racism

'There are also two other black lunch ladies. I mean, she says she's black, but she isn't indeed, ok?' According to the lunch lady, her co-worker didn't have the color for such a classification. She justified: 'She's just the daughter of a black father and mother'. Then, referring to her daughter: 'She suffered racism, but she's not even black. She's just the daughter of a black man. She looks like you. She's normal, you know? She has your brown eyes and lighter skin, but she's a black man's daughter'. She also added with wide eyes: 'There aren't even black people here in the cleaning crew'. (Lunch lady and the Researcher / Field diary).

No. There are no black employees here, but we had in the past. He quit, right girls? (Pedagogical secretary, Three employees, and the Researcher / Field diary).

At first, it is possible to notice the contradiction between the two speeches since there is a denial of the presence of black employees at school. The invisibility of the black population associated with the phenomenon of colorism is racial violence that permeates the school's daily life and that, many times, is not perceived as racism and even less elected as issues to be discussed and fought. According to Devulsky (2021), colorism involves a racist yoke that conforms men and women to try to fit into the existential white molds, encouraging the consumption of clothing, aesthetics, and language. With this, the closer to this ideal and the lighter the skin tone, the better opportunities for social and familial inclusion; the darker the skin tone, there is a drastic decrease in real opportunities.

In addition, it is worth wondering how much the school community has questioned the absence of black employees or teachers at the school since, when answering the researcher's question, they did not show any astonishment, that is, the naturalization of not having black people in public positions or in positions that depend on higher education is affirmed.

They say it is whining – Racial violence in the school environment

No. I've never experienced or observed it. At least in this school, I've never heard or known anything from my colleagues. (Brazilian History Teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

So, there is, in fact, racism, prejudice. I saw it today and I've seen other similar situations. I've also seen between teachers and students; it isn't explicit, but you can notice, you know? We teachers know. It is the way of treating. It's the way they talk about that student. We know they think or act like that because of racism. (Artistic Education Teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

It is possible to highlight the contradiction between the two statements: the denial, naturalization, or subtlety with which racism manifests itself, bringing harmful

consequences for black students' lives since it decreases the probability of denunciation and defense of rights. It is inferred that this category signals what Kilomba (2018, p. 78) called everyday racism, which is defined as "[...] all vocabulary, discourses, images, gestures, actions, and looks that place the black subject and People of Color as Other". Therefore, in daily school life, there are more declared forms of racism, like the vocabulary used, or more subtle ones, like a teacher's "way of treating". It is noteworthy that these daily episodes drastically affect the quality of life of the black population and that, in basic education, they interfere with the life trajectory of black students in various ways.

In this perspective, Moreira (2020) clarifies that, as the antithesis of whiteness, blackness is posed as something that cannot be morally and aesthetically appreciated. The author states that racist episodes act incessantly in our cultural universe and, as a result, the black population may still suffer from low self-esteem, decreased personal aspiration, depressive behaviors, social withdrawal, and pathological fears.

They do not know how to express themselves – Students' actions and attitudes

In elementary school, they even comment something, for example, about how wrong it is to be racist, but not to the point of rising a debate. The elementary school students are too young and still don't have a notion, though being victims of racism; they don't know how to express this yet or don't have a total understanding of the concept. (Brazilian History teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

It was in the 7th grade. The students debated about the theme. Actually, everything happens during the breaks since they always come back from the break questioning why there is racism, prejudice; why people have different lives. I don't know if you understood. I can't explain it, but they don't think racism is normal, natural. They question why it exists and they question why they are seeing or hearing something out there. (Life Project Teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

Evidently, the Life Project Teacher's statements demystified the idea expressed in the Brazilian History teacher's discourse. Students daily show the need for talking, debating ideas and concepts, and sharing feelings concerning racism and other social issues, such as "[...] why people have different lives". However, the school does not offer enough space and time for the teachers to critically analyze Brazilian society, nor to advance the studies of the ethno-racial relations. For Ribeiro (2019), the promotion of a multiplicity of voices would be able to interrupt an authorized and unique discourse, which pretends to be universal. In school, when debates are not allowed or when there is a

justification that students are not prepared, what is revealed, in fact, is the unpreparedness of the education system.

There is no solution – Developing the ethno-social theme in the school curriculum

In elementary school, we don't talk about social movements and black people's movements. The school only talks about slavery itself and how it was historically perpetuated today. (Brazilian History teacher, final years of elementary school / Interview).

But let me tell you: there isn't a lot. There is something in every subject but only the specific quota of the law, just because it's mandatory, you know? The syllabus only includes it to show that it's there. It depends more on us to enrich the material ourselves. (Pedagogical Coordinator, final years of elementary school / Interview).

In the first statement, it is possible to observe that, in the school universe, the black population is reduced to slavery, and in the second, there is an allegation by the pedagogical coordinator himself in relation to the syllabus used daily with students in the final years of elementary school. In both speeches, the absence of the study of ethno-racial relations in the classroom is revealed, regardless of the subject since the coordinator makes a general analysis of the contents. The importance of the black teacher in the formation of black students is also discussed since the latter verbalized three times that the professional talked about racism at school, recognizing the struggle and social mobilization that this teacher provided daily at school. A single reference in the school context has already sensitized the black student; therefore, the need and the effectiveness of the fulfillment of Law no. 10.639/2003 are reaffirmed, especially regarding the rescue of the black people's contribution in the social, economic, and political areas of the country, demonstrating how the Brazilian black culture and the black people are active participants - and not reduced to former slaves - in the formation of the national society.

According to Gomes (2012), The discussion about race relations in Brazil and African History and Culture can and should be done with students of all levels, stages, and modalities of education, however, it is necessary to consider that there are several interests at stake and that the education of ethnic-racial relations shakes the structures of a classist, sexist, racist and homophobic power, so there are movements so that the educational system is not a stimulator of democratic mentalities. The author explains that the implementation of Law no. 10.639/2003, besides being an initiative to combat

racism, is configured as a political and epistemological stance. Against this mobilizing force to guarantee rights, there are several obstacles, both in the rooting and in the sustainability of anti-racist pedagogical practices, such as prejudice and racial discrimination.

The last axis of analysis is the comparative synthesis, which was concerned with the verification of the degree of knowledge of the ethno-racial theme in the school researched, understanding the mandatory school performance in favor of the implementation of Law no. 10.639/03 and the historical and democratic importance of the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture (BRASIL, 2013).

It was possible to notice that, of the four teachers interviewed, three said they had not participated, so far, in continuing education courses on ethno-racial issues. Of the four teachers interviewed, all said they had not been supported by the pedagogical coordinator in their studies on this issue. Of the four teachers interviewed, three said they had never participated in any projects on this topic. Of the four teachers interviewed, three said they knew about the existence of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for Teaching Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture, but none of them had read or studied this document. Of the four teachers interviewed, all answered that the school does not promote events that favor the experience of Black culture. Of the four teachers interviewed, three said they had never done activities related to Black Consciousness Day. Of the four teachers interviewed, all acknowledged the absence of black protagonism in the didactic material. Of the four teachers interviewed, three acknowledged that they do not look for reading materials to work on racial issues in the classroom. None of them mentioned the use of the school library. Of the four teachers interviewed, three acknowledged that the ethnic/racial theme is not part of the school's official curriculum. Of the four teachers interviewed, all said that they do not discuss politics associated with ethnic/racial issues in the classroom.

Specifically concerning the teachers, they showed low theoretical knowledge about the studies of ethno-racial relations and the meaning of their presence in the national school curriculum, in addition to low practical involvement with themes that permeate the Brazilian social formation, such as racism, which is a structural and

structuring violent phenomenon. It is possible to state that teachers are figures of respectability and reliability, therefore, when the student's voice is denied, distorted, or ignored in front of the representative of authority in the classroom, there is a higher probability of not perceiving himself as capable of active participation in society, politics, and culture.

Moreover, this school has not shown that it has conducted a curriculum review that would include the ethno-racial theme and the appreciation of the history and culture of Africans and Afro-Brazilians. The Eurocentric values and the history of the formation of society from the European perspective continue to be offered to the students as the only truths. Thus, it is not possible to affirm that this school has acted in favor of breaking the silence about racial inequality in Brazil, nor has it organized anti-racist actions based on the formation of citizens who are aware of their political action.

In general, the school community is unprepared to develop a democratic, anti-racist school that favors new mentalities, opposing the project of white supremacy and questioning the myth of racial democracy, colorism, and the various discriminatory and exclusionary actions against the black Brazilian population.

5 Closing remarks

Considering all the above, it is possible to affirm that the state school, located in the center of a city in the countryside of São Paulo state, has not paid attention to the demand for ethno-racial relations education, so there are reservations in considering it democratic, inclusive, and favoring a true human and social development. This ethnographic research, despite being in an educational unit, demonstrates the need for the educational system and the literature to focus on discussions about the degree of implementation of Law no. 10.639/2003 in Brazilian schools since there are still findings that, after almost 20 years of its enactment, the school trajectory of black students remains different from that of white students, with greater disadvantage for the former. Besides the disadvantage, they live with exclusion, contempt, and violence, being denied the right to their identity, ancestry, pride, and appreciation of who they are.

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