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## **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: DIALOGUE BETWEEN A BRAZILIAN TEACHER AND A RWANDAN TEACHER**

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**ABSTRACT:** Our purpose in these interviews is giving each other, and our audience, a personal frame, with basic information, of the education and the educational opportunities in our countries. We are two teachers studying in the USA. The first of these authors, Carlos Castro, is from Brazil. The second one, Marie Grace Nyiramavugo, is from Rwanda. We have experience in teaching for secondary school/high schools and universities/higher institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogue. Education. Teaching. Opportunities. Brazil. Rwanda.

**RESUMO:** Nosso propósito nessas entrevistas é dar um ao outro, e aos leitores, um retrato pessoal, com informações básicas, sobre a educação e as oportunidades educacionais em nossos países. Nós somos dois professores estudando pós-graduação nos Estados Unidos da América. O primeiro destes dois autores, Carlos Castro, é brasileiro. A segunda, Marie Grace Nyiramavugo, é ruandesa. Nós temos experiência como professores em escolas de nível médio e universidades.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Diálogo. Educação. Ensino. Oportunidades. Brasil. Ruanda.

Dialogue is necessary to construct knowledge and we have to take advantages of the opportunities. Sharing experiences in education between two different countries with similarities and dissimilarities, like Brazil and Rwanda, seems a great opportunity. Our purpose in these interviews is giving each other, and our audience, a frame, with our feelings and basic information, of the schools and opportunities in our countries. We are two teachers studying in the USA. The first of these authors, Carlos Castro, is from Brazil. The second one, Marie Grace Nyiramavugo, is from Rwanda. We have experience in teaching for secondary school/high schools and universities/higher institutions.

The Brazilian author has been a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais since 2011, with period sandwich from the University of California in Santa Barbara sponsored by Fulbright and CAPES. He has master's degree in Social Management, Education and Local Development, and has done research on language production in virtual environments.

The Rwandan author is a master's student sponsored by Fulbright and English teacher who holds a bachelor degree from Kigali Institute of Education. Besides teaching in Distance Learning Program at the Kigali Institute of Education, Teacher Training center and some secondary schools, she has worked as a trainer with the Teacher Service Commission in Rwanda and currently wants to promote teaching languages through interactive tasks.

The methodology utilized here consists of four different steps. First, we wrote questions about education in our countries for each other. Second, we answered the questions according to our experience and shared them. After that, we commented our answers trying to show what we could learn from each other's experience. We think this is a productive dialogue whose result is showed in the following sections.

### **Carlos asks Marie Grace**

#### **What do you think changed in the system and opportunities in education in your country in the last years?**

Among changes which have occurred recently, after the 1994 genocide for example, there is an increase in the number of schools, learners and advanced technology and a shift in the teaching language. For instance, concerning students, every year, there are many students who graduate from KIE and some colleges which include Rukara College of Education, Kavumu College of Education, etc. and teach at different schools in Rwanda. Some students who graduate from the National University of Rwanda also join teaching. There are some others who finish their studies in private universities and work as teachers but I do not have the exact number of these universities now. Besides students who graduate from universities and higher institutions, there are other students who finish their studies in Teacher Training Centers (TTCs) and start teaching in primary schools. All of these universities/higher institutions and TTCs provide the country with more qualified teachers. Another point is that many nine-year basic education schools have been built to receive students who do not get required results in the National Exams for joining senior one and four in public secondary schools. The required results for studying in senior one and four in the public schools depend on the number of students that those schools can receive. (This means that not getting required marks for joining the public schools does not mean failing in the National exams.) The nine-year basic education has currently become twelve-year basic education<sup>1</sup>. Technology is another area which has improved in Rwanda. For instance, when I was a student at TTC we had no computers. But, nowadays, there are many computers and all students, at this school, study computer subject depending on their options. There is another important event which is the shift from French to English whereby the majority, if not all, of public universities and secondary schools teach many subjects in English. However, it was not easy for both learners and teachers to study and teach in English while they had been doing that in French in the previous years. That was the reason why in 2009 and 2010 all teachers in Rwanda were trained in English. The training of teachers in English goes on because today there are mentors who help teachers in that language in order to work effectively. I would also mention that, as we don't have enough qualified teachers in English in my country, some teachers from abroad, mainly Uganda have got opportunities to teach in Rwanda.

#### **Had you thought about going to university when you were studying in secondary school? Were requirements for getting a scholarship to university easier or more difficult at that time than today?**

Yes, I had. I had thought about going to university when I was in secondary school. The requirements for getting a scholarship to university were not easy in my option, which is "Option Normale Primaire". If I translate the name, it may be close in meaning to "teacher training option". The required marks/results were high and often varied yearly depending on the number of students universities would receive from all over the country. Despite the hard requirements, I did not worry

much about going to university. I had thought that I would decide what to do after receiving my results. I think it is hard to say that it was harder or easier to get scholarships for higher institutions when I was a student than today. What I would say is that there is a bigger number of students in higher institutions today than before.

**About resources and quality, does the government give schools enough necessary materials and teachers? Are all teachers qualified to teach in secondary schools?**

I will tell you more about some schools, where I worked for example. I worked at schools which are known to be among very good schools in the country. Those schools have good equipment and installations like libraries, computers, and other things. The schools offer students education of quality because quality is related to many factors including equipment. I also know about a program of giving computers to different primary and secondary schools in my country<sup>ii</sup>. Although these computers are distributed to those schools, there is need for more qualified or trained teachers to teach computer subject. In addition to the distribution of computers, the government of Rwanda also distributed new books written in English in secondary schools, nine year basic education schools and primary schools. I don't have enough information to share with you about resources in all schools in the country. About qualification of teachers, there are some teachers who are qualified as I have mentioned before and others who are not qualified to teach at some levels of education. For instance, I have experience about qualification and I have worked in Distance Learning Program (DTP) which is specialized in qualifying secondary school teachers. The government created DTP in Kigali Institute of Education in 2001 in order to improve the quality of our education. There is more information about that in an essay of Daliya Mukamusoni (2006) available at this link<sup>iii</sup>. I think this kind of initiative is helpful and is working well. There are different DTP centers in Kigali and other provinces of Rwanda. However, there are some challenges in this program. For example, it is not easy for the students there, who also teach in secondary schools, to study and work at the same time.

**Do secondary schools prepare students for working effectively or for going to university? Is it easy to find a job after secondary school studies?**

Students are generally prepared for both working and going to universities, but the work or going to universities depends on many factors. For instance, students from schools which are led by religious people perform better than others. For example, Ecole de sciences de Byimana perform very well, seminaries, TTC Save, and others schools which receive students with high scores in the national examination also perform very well. There are many other factors which contribute to the success of students. So, studying at good schools gives students more opportunities to find jobs or going to universities. It is not easy to find a job in cities and urban areas for students who have finished only secondary school studies.

**Did you pay for your university studies, or did you have to work?**

I did not pay for my studies at university because I got required marks for a scholarship at that time. When students have done the national exam, there are marks/results which are required for scholarships. After marking the national examinations, the National Council of Examinations makes lists of students, with their results, from the highest score to the lowest, depending on subjects the students did. Then, a list of students for scholarships is made from that highest score, number one,

to the number of students public universities can receive. However, the number of the students who receives the scholarships is limited because higher institutions are not able to receive all students. In addition, this scholarship is not hundred percent. After finishing the studies, students need to pay back some of the money that the government paid for them in order to use this money in education. I did not work while studying at university because I thought that working would prevent me from studying and performing well. There is another reason why I could not work and study, but it is personal.

**Did you choose to study to be a teacher? Were you worried about finding a job after you finished your studies?**

I didn't think in other professions in my life. I started studying education in secondary school at Teacher Training Center. Besides that, I like teaching and I did not worry about finding a job after my studies because I was studying for being a qualified teacher and there were many opportunities for teachers who had a university degree.

**As a woman, is the chance to go to university for women rare or not in your country? Are there many women in secondary schools and universities?**

In secondary schools, women study in different fields but I do not know their percentage. There is some news that noticed an increase in the numbers of girls at technical and professional schools. At this kind of school, the girls are already the majority<sup>iv</sup>. This is important because it shows the improvement in women's education in secondary schools. Here, I would add that the government encourages girls to study all subjects including sciences but I do not mean that boys are excluded from this education.

About universities, I think that there is a bigger number of men studying there than women. It is hard to say that it is rare for women to go to university in my country, but I would also mention that the number of women needs increasing. In Africa, we are, nowadays, an example of the promotion of equality between men and women with, for example, the majority of women in the parliament<sup>v</sup>. I hope that this number of women in the parliament may contribute to the increase in the number of women in higher education and to further improvement of the women's status in Rwanda.

**I learned that you have three different official languages in your country. How are they taught in schools? Are there any other languages in your country? Do you think using these languages is good for the culture in your country or not?**

It is true that there are three official languages in my country. At the first three years of primary school, learners generally study subjects in Kinyarwanda. The other three years, they study almost all subjects in English. In whole primary school, that total is six years, they study English as a subject too. Our secondary school is six years too. At these times, learners study almost all subjects in English and study English, French and Kinyarwanda as subjects. If the student joins the languages, at the last three years of secondary school he/she has many hours of French, English and Kinyarwanda. In some schools, mainly private ones, learners study in English or French from kindergarten to secondary school. In others, students study some subjects in English and others in French. I think it is good to study these languages because they help learners who join languages in the last three years of the secondary school and higher institutions. Languages also help learners

when they have finished and found jobs or when they go to study abroad. For example, I study and do different work in English because I studied it at school. I would add that in my country, Kiswahili, a language spoken in some countries in East Africa such as Kenya, Tanzania and others is taught in secondary schools and some universities in the language departments. I think that these languages are not bad to our culture.

### **What is your best experience and worst experience in teaching for you?**

My best experience is that many of the students I taught are working and others are studying. When I met some of them, they thanked me very much for giving them knowledge and education. There are even some of my students who completed their studies at different universities and few others who got scholarships abroad and I'm so proud of them.

My worst experience is that I sometimes asked my students what they thought they would/will do after their studies and almost all of them answered that they would/will not become teachers. However, students from TTC and KIE in DTP said they liked teaching.

### **How is the work of teaching in your country? Do teachers have opportunities to continue their studies after getting a bachelor degree or masters?**

I think teaching is a job which requires knowledge, courage, patience, endurance, passion and being creative. This is because a teacher is almost always busy searching, preparing lessons, notes for students, exercises, tests, exams and marking students' work for effective feedback. At schools where I worked, teachers work hard. I think this work of teachers is common for all teachers in the world although there maybe some who do not work hard. It is not easy to continue in masters or PhD programs in my country. A few people who have good jobs or whose families are able to pay tuition join master's program in different universities. They study in Rwanda or abroad, at e-learning or full time programs. There are other people that chose a hard life to pay expensive master's or PhD program. Other people get scholarships by the government of Rwanda, or by some foreign countries. For example, the Fulbright program gave me a scholarship for master's program in the US and there are other people from Rwanda who are in the same program or that finished. I do not know more information about PhD programs in my country, but I know that there are some people from Rwanda who study in PhD abroad.

### **What do you think can help teachers in your country?**

The Rwandan government has improved teachers' situations so far with some actions like creating credit cooperative, Umwarimu Sacco for example<sup>vi</sup>, and increasing salaries as well. Although some teachers have borrowed money from the cooperative, it sometimes takes time to receive the money. This cooperative is helpful, but it needs improving. In addition, the prices at the markets have increased more. I would also mention that there are still some teachers who need training in English. I think it will be helpful if the training goes on. I say this because I don't know if this training opportunity will continue or not. It is also helpful to talk to teachers who are being trained in order to get some information about the improvement of their English. I do not worry much about this because the Teacher Service Commission is there to help teachers in this issue of training. Another important point is that all people should be responsible for children at school, at home or on their way home. Here, I mean that all people should help in good behavior and life of learners. If

you and I see a learner with a problem, we should do something to solve it. A teachers is not the only person to take care of learners. However, students are also concerned with their education. They should play a great role in their education by working hard and making sure their discipline is good. This can can facilitate teaching-learning process.

### **What can you say about the future of education in your country?**

I can say something as a teacher with some information about education in my country. As I've said, while answering some questions, there are many things which have been done in education in my country. In addition, I expect education in Rwanda to continue improving because there are workers who are in charge of education in different areas in the country. Besides this, there are parents' committee at many, if not all, secondary schools that work with schools in order to make sure education is effective. Although I do not have much information about what the above workers (in charge of education) and committee have done about the improvement of teacher's status, I think that they know how hard teachers work. It is in this regard that I expect more opportunities for teachers to be availed so that they can work more effectively and improve their status more. Moreover, the government has an important program that gives some loans to students with high score in the National Exams, and whose families cannot afford to pay tuition. If this program goes on, it will help in making education better.

### **Marie Grace asks Carlos**

#### **How long does it take to complete secondary school program and what subjects are available?**

Our system of education in Brazil consists of nine years of basic education that include what is called junior and junior high school here in the US. These nine years are divided into three cycles of three years each. The last four years of this system involves more subjects and teachers who are specialized in subjects they teach. The common subjects include Portuguese and Literature, Maths, Geography, Natural Sciences, History, Physical Education, Arts and English. These are the most common topics, but the local government can add some new subjects according to the local culture. In some schools, we have Religion, too, but the approach has to be historic instead defending one or other religion because, over the law, Brazil is a country without any official religion. In other schools, we have Spanish, which is becoming more common nowadays because one new law that intends to install official the teaching of Spanish in all schools. At the High School, the subject science is divided into Chemistry, Physics and Biology. High School normally goes for three years too. Some schools can offer together the High School plus professional courses. Unfortunately, this kind of system is not too common because the local governments don't have a lot of money. But, the federal government has used his budget to increase this kind of school.

#### **Are all teachers in secondary school qualified to teach at such a level?**

Currently, teachers in Brazil start their work after finishing in colleges. In some public schools, undergraduate students can teach the subjects they major in before they finish their studies in colleges. Unfortunately, we don't have too many people interested in teaching because of low salaries. This situation forces some teachers to teach the whole day and the result is not good. We need, urgently, to improve the Basic Schools in my country. This is one of the reasons, for example, for the protests in Brazil at the times of the Confederation Cup. The law about education is



changing, but the budget in some states and cities is not enough for offering fair salaries and more courses for qualifying teachers. One common situation in Brazil is schools having some computers available for students and the teachers are not qualified to use them in class. At universities, the situation is better. In Public Universities, for example, new professors, nowadays, have to be doctor, the spots and courses available are increasing, however, we need more investment in the formation of the professors.

### **What is the teaching language in Brazil and how are languages taught?**

Normally, teaching foreign languages in schools is a problem. As you know, I have experience in that as a student and as a teacher. At the most of the schools, public or private, the time for foreign languages is minimal, like 2 hours a week. Besides that, some of the language teachers are not qualified to teach languages. I think some teachers will disagree with me in this question. I want to clarify that my position is about the regular situation and not about a hundred percent of teachers. Teaching English or Spanish, for example, at the most of the schools, does not involve speaking skills. Many are even reducing the two hours a week to one. For instance, governments of some states, like mine, Minas Gerais, are trying to reduce the time for foreign languages from 2 classes a week to 1 class and this is not efficient. For example, I studied French in a secondary school for only two years, twice a week. In my High School I couldn't learn English, too, because the situation was similar with few opportunities. I learned Spanish at the university, in a specific Spanish Course. Some years after my major, I studied English for my post-graduation. As a teacher, I remember a situation in a renamed school, where I was teaching, only once a week, and the students were surprised with me because I was speaking the language that I was teaching. It was a new situation for them who never studied foreign languages with the teacher speaking that language. This is a picture of the situation.

### **Do you have native languages? If yes, how is it preserved?**

My national language is Portuguese and our entire education system is in this language. But, we have many languages in my country, from the native Brazilian people, that are dying and the government does not have clear effort to maintain those languages. Our native people were organized in tribes and some of these tribes still exist. I noticed that teachers there teach their students in their native languages. Despite this smart decision, we don't have prepared teachers for these native languages and, in addition, the problems of these people in Brazil goes beyond education.

### **What are the criteria to be admitted to university?**

The universities in Brazil are free for choosing their system of entrance criteria. Despite that, the universities are encouraged to use one national evaluation that the students can take after High School. Nowadays, this national system is the most used and it is also required if a student needs a scholarship. With the result of this test, the students can choose the best university for them in one national on-line system that shows all public opportunities available. It works well. Some good public universities in Brazil are using only this system. At the last selection, there were 54 institutions in the whole country. Others mix the entrance system. In general, private universities and colleges accept this test, too and if the student doesn't do or did and doesn't succeed in it, in some private schools, he can do one different test at the university.



### **How many public and private universities are in Brazil? How many students were admitted to universities, for example, in a certain year?**

We have many universities in my country that, unfortunately, are not enough for almost 200 hundred million people. Public universities, without any tuition, that offer undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate courses, are 109 according to one rank in the current year<sup>vii</sup>. Half of these institutions are using the national system of selection in 2013 and they offered almost 40 thousands spots for students<sup>viii</sup>. According an informal list on Wikipedia, there are more than 140<sup>ix</sup> private universities in Brazil. However, as I mentioned at the beginning, we need more spots in some fields of studies. At this moment, for example, the government is trying to get physicians from other countries like Cuba, Spain and Portugal as part of one national program for public health<sup>x</sup>. About the number of students studying under graduate degree, I have some numbers from 2011 according to Brazilian Ministry of Education. These times, Brazil had more than 6.7 millions enrollments in more than 29 thousands courses of under graduation in presence and in e-learning<sup>xi</sup>. We have big numbers, but these numbers need a careful analysis.

### **Do your country have special university for education? How does it work?**

All fields of study have a special program for teachers – Languages, Chemistry, Maths, Physics, Geography, History, Arts, Biology, etc – and, commonly, the public universities have a college that works only with education, doing research, training teachers for basic education, and helping the courses in teaching at the different fields. Becoming a teacher requires a special course named *Licenciatura* whose the focus is teaching and, in general, lasts four years. Some universities, but not the majority, offer this kind of course in 3 or 3.5 years. The most common is 4 or more years. The last option is in case the student wants to get majors in two or more languages.

### **Do students pay for their studies or is it the government that pays for them?**

The government offers public and free education through sponsored federal—the majority, and state universities. However, the available spots in this kind of institution are not enough. So, some people have to study in private schools. If a student shows that he cannot pay and he has a sufficient score on the national exam to go to the university, the government can help him with different programs. If the student, for example, studied the last year of the High School in a public school and the salary of his all family is under a certain limit, about 1,000 dollars/month<sup>xii</sup>, then the government can pay the tuition for this student. If this is not the situation of the student, but he still needs help, the government can help him loaning him money with low interest.

### **How is the number of women in secondary and universities compared to the number of men?**

In all statistics about education in Brazil, women are better than men. We have one analysis at the Brazilian government that shows that women in Brazil are more educated than men. The numbers, about the last census show us that, in general, the women have 7.3 years of study. On the other hand, men have 7.1 years of study<sup>xiii</sup>. Other analysis about numbers in 2010, show that in 2009, 55.1 percent of students at Brazilian universities were women and 44.9 percent were men. About all of this numbers we have to take care. If the women in Brazil are more educated, unfortunately, they have fewer opportunities than men. I think this is an important topic, but for another conversation.

### **How are the job opportunities situation for teachers in the country and why?**

The number of unemployment in Brazil has decreased and has been between 4 and 5 percent<sup>xiv</sup>. This year, this number is increasing and at the end of May was 5.8%<sup>xv</sup>. Unfortunately, the salaries are not increasing and the field of education needs more investment. Teachers in public schools in Brazil do not make good money and, frequently, have to work in two or three different schools. The result is teachers with different kind of ailments both physical and emotional. The number of students starting the major in education is decreasing too. Then, we have available positions and students without teachers. Other professions in humanities have the same kind of problems. For this reason, we have in Brazil different professionals trying to start a new career as teachers. The most valued careers in Brazil nowadays are linked to construction, information and technology, and health. Some careers are totally inflated like lawyers and nurses.

### **How are teachers viewed in the country and why?**

Families, in general, hope to find good teachers and recognize in them some importance. So, as I mentioned in a question above, teachers in Brazil are working harder than they can do and the result, in many cases, is not good because teaching is more than giving instructions in classes and the majority of our teachers don't have enough time for more than that. In order to get success in taking tests for going to the university, for example, many students need extra courses. This situation at the low levels of schools in Brazil must to be better for increase all society. The result is that people that, day-by-day, believe less and less in public schools and public teachers.

### **Carlos and his final considerations**

I've known Marie Grace since I'm arrived here in the US, late March, this current year. Since then, I have paid attention to her shy and clever way to experience and share life. With her, I have learned many things including to argue patiently in a simple way. However, the experience that this African woman has is the most valuable for me to learn. Being part of one community with her is a really great opportunity. When I decided to study these times here, my most important wish was to be a part of one community where I could really be learning—more than the schools can teach us—culture. More than I'd imagined, I'm learning different meanings of the life, with Marie Grace and other friends.

We have had important moments of interaction although we have cultural borders, including language. She is my partner in my academic activities that, fortunately, always extend to the personal experiences. We have too many experiences to share and this represents, also, the problems of our countries, especially about education. However, we are engaged in solutions and good examples instead crying for the past. For example, Marie Grace is engaged in training teachers in an innovative e-learning program – the Distance Learning Program, which is making the difference in the improvements in education her country.

Her answers showed us that in Rwanda we have people concerned about education, as one tool to change, to promote peace. In addition, more than concerning, there are people working for that. Unfortunately, these pages are not enough to write all about our conversations and all we've shared in these four months of acquaintanceship. At the end of this conversation, I would like to thank Marie Grace for all the interaction that we experienced here which has made me a better person. Thanks Marie Grace. I hope I will have more opportunities in which to share and construct thoughts with you.

### **Marie Grace and her final consideration**

I have studied in the same class with Carlos in the US since March 2013. In our classes we often worked together while discussing different topics in groups. However, we sometimes worked in different groups because there were students from different countries in the world in our class. I was very happy to study in a class where there are students with different cultures. Carlos and I did this work together. It was a huge chance to study with Carlos, a person who worked as a teacher and is a specialist in education. Working with Carlos helped me learn more about education, culture and life in Brazil.

From Carlos' answers, I have learned that Brazil is a very big country with many people. I would say that Rwanda is a small country but with many people, too. The difference is that in Brazil, a place with about 150 native languages, these languages are dying and in Rwanda we are preserving our first language, the Kinyarwanda. Despite the differences, I noticed more similarities in education between Rwanda and Brazil like special universities for training teachers. Besides that, both our countries have done a lot of things to make education better but they still need more improvements. Carlos supports this idea of more changes in education, too, which is a very good point.

I think that we will continue sharing ideas in order to help ourselves, our nations and the world at large for better education. Before I finish my comments, I would like to thank Carlos very much for the share of experience in education and culture. I think we have much more to share about education in our countries and in the world. Let's learn and share with others.

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