



Racial Discrimination as A Form of Violence: A Challenge to Education Today

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ABSTRACT

Racial inequalities in schools are demonstrated by the differentiated treatment meted out to black students in the form of their discriminatory representations in teaching books where they are either omitted, belittled or negatively portrayed, by the absence of the History of Negroes in school curricula and by many other means amply registered in the literature. In that regard the study made use of descriptive and analytic research with a qualitative approach, to investigate what measures schools adopt to foster sociability and respect for diversity as a means of overcoming racism, and racial prejudice and discrimination which generate inequality in the school environment and outside of it. The overall objective is to discuss racism as being a serious form of violence in the ambit of Young People and Adult Education. The authors carried out their field research in 2011 in a government-run school in Brasília where they listened to 06 teachers and 90 students from the morning and night classes and on the basis of their statements inferred that silencing and omission are tolerated in the school when in reality it should be preparing the school community to acquire an understanding of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, to respect the various different cultures, and to value the black population, thereby fostering a culture of peace. How can that be done? The paper makes some suggestions.

KEYWORDS : School violence. Young People and Adult Education. Racial Discrimination. Act nº 10.639/2003.

Introduction

The first violent incidents in the school environment in Brazil started to appear in the 1980s but a research survey made in the sphere of the Federal District revealed that the phenomenon strongly marked the 1990s when incidents of violence in schools became increasingly frequent and the school lost its former reputation of being a safe environment. The dynamic nature of the phenomenon that several researchers on the theme have pointed out (cf., Debarbieux, 2007) led to its being studied more intensely in the 1990s and up to the present day. That dynamism, in the opinion of some researchers (cf. p. ex., Koehler, 2006) can be associated to the re-democratization process that was unfolding in Brazil in which the student, the relations between the school and society, the family and the very significance of the school as an institution were changing in the face of emerging challenges. On the other hand, an examination of Brazilian history shows that school violence has occurred, albeit in a heavily veiled form ever since the end of the last century, if we take into account the discriminatory practices reproduced in the teaching material with the exclusion of the figure of the Negro, as well as other forms of symbolic violence committed against students: strictly enforced rules, physical punishment, and many other discriminatory acts practiced by adults.

Compliance with the obligation to foster sociability among individuals and to nurture respect for differences of color, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social class and so many others, is not always evident in the classroom. The absence of any activities designed to promote harmonious sociability of various cultures has the effect of exacerbating existing prejudices and stereotyping. Among those prejudices is racial prejudice. The manifestations of racial discrimination of black students are multiple and they are not merely those of students against students but permeate the entire school community, with accentuated differences visible between whites and blacks. Disturbed by such questions the two authors, researchers in the fields of forms of violence and antiracist education respectively, joined forces to reflect on and present racial discrimination as a serious form of violence, given its devastating effects on the lives of Brazil's Afro-descendent population.

Although there is no consensual definition for the phenomenon of violence among researchers, according to Charlot (2005), there is always an opinion, whether occult or otherwise about what is accept-

able or not in regard to the treatment meted out to individuals, in this case black students. Racial discrimination addresses the black student as an inferior and consequently generates even greater inequality. In Brazilian schools, in spite of all the laws designed to promote the equality and integrity of the individual such as the Law of Brazilian Education Bases and Guidelines (Brasil, 2010) and the Brazilian Federal Constitution (Brasil, 2010a), it can be seen that actions to put them into effect are generally suppressed or omitted. Against that background, this study presents data obtained by research undertaken in the Brazilian federal capital among students engaged in courses of Education for Adults and Young People for whom racial discrimination is one of their realities. The study also highlights the way in which its occurrence has become endowed with an aura of naturalness.

Before setting out the data itself we would present the reader with a short explanation and definition of the various terms associated to this question. The article calls for a reflection on the school's role in the light of all he racial violence that takes place in its ordinary daily round and which accentuates even further the differences between whites and blacks. The difficulty that is found for a harmonious sociability among differences leads schools in Brazilian reality and indeed in the reality of other places too, to become territories of violence. It would seem however, that the institutions have not yet realized this and their attitudes are excessively directed at the physical security and integrity aspects alone; and their efforts, only at overcoming that aspect of the problem (Cf., Lira; Gomes, 2010).

Racial discrimination as a form of violence

There are various definitions of violence to be found in the literature and that variety could well be explained by the new paradigms for violence that are emerging, accompanied by new meanings and significations, expanding the concept to include events that are usually glossed over as being customary practices in social relations. In spite of the vast extent of the literature on this topic, which constitutes a challenge to Brazil and the world at large alike, there is still a visible need to devote more attention to racial discrimination as a serious form of violence that is proliferating rapidly in the school environment.

Thus there will be no presentation here of all the traditional definitions for the term "violence" but instead some of the definitions that tend to justify our proposal that discrimination based on skin color

or race is just as much a specific form of violence as other more intensely and commonly addressed manifestations of it, like sexual violence, physical violence and so on. It is believed that reflecting on this problem so strongly present in Brazilian reality is a first step towards meeting the challenge of overcoming it, while at the same time delimiting the school's role and responsibility in the light of this problem which contributes so strongly to making Brazil even more unequal.

"Violence" according to Charlot (2005, p. 24) is the term that designates an act, a situation or anything whereby an individual is treated as an object and is denied his rights and human dignity as a member of society; as a unique human being. Again according to Charlot (2002) school violence can be considered on three levels: physical violence (blows, wounding, sexual assault, theft, crimes, vandalism), incivility (humiliation, rude words, disrespect), and symbolic or institutional violence (teaching reluctantly, power relations between teacher and students, etc.). Racial discrimination can be present in all three levels. Another important definition that is open to including racial discrimination as a serious form of violence is the one proffered by Michaud (1989, p. 11) who considers that violence exists when, in a situation of interaction, one or several of the actors involved acts directly or indirectly, specifically or diffusely in a way that inflicts harm on one or various people to a greater or lesser degree; that is, harm to their physical or moral integrity, their possessions, or their symbolic or cultural participations, as is the case with the situations black boy and girl students are subjected to.

Both the above concepts suffice to highlight racial discrimination as a facet of violence to which black students are liable and on whom it has perverse effects. Nevertheless, this form of violence has gone unnoticed even in the schools, which are, or should be a place not only for learning, but also for the constitution of the individual as a citizen. What we can see, as Bento (2006) has pointed out, is that many black individuals living in a society that discriminates them and associates them to a negative image, internalize a bad image of themselves and of their own people. Insofar as they feel themselves to be inferior, in the authors' opinion, they effectively reproduce the worst effect of racism, which is the loss of self-confidence.

Thus the question arises: how can it be possible to talk about good quality education for all if at the same time racial discrimination is treated as something natural in the school environment? How can the school handle this problem in such way as to stimulate and ensure harmonious sociability and respect for diversity?

It is well at this point to underscore the importance of the educator as a mediator of conflicts or as a curb on their arising at all, and achieving that by offering students guidance and advice. That is part of an educator's mission in regard to preparing students to understand African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, leading them to respect various cultures and to place a higher value on the black population, as recommended by the provisions of Federal Act nº 10.639, sanctioned on January 9, 2003 (Brasil, 2003). What we find, however, is quite the opposite. Racist violence is often viewed as a banal occurrence in the interior of schools and that has come about through the permissiveness of teachers insofar as they have opted to adopt postures of omission. Such omission is just as serious as any actual discriminatory practices. In that respect Lira (2010) considers that escalation of violence in schools, generally due to omission on the part of the institution, to viewing the facts as mere banalities, and to investments being made in largely unsuccessful measures such as excessive attention to physical security measures alone, has greatly contributed to discrediting the school as a qualifying and formative institution and stigmatizing it, in addition to its contribution to exacerbating social inequality and academic failure.

As regards racist violence practiced against individuals, it may be physical, ranging from simple aggressions to murder, or it may be psychological. In the latter case, Costa (1986) in his analysis of its constitutive elements identifies the following consequences: 1) the black person's identity is destroyed; 2) racist violence can readily destroy the black person's will to exploit all his potentialities; 3) black people's thinking becomes thinking conducted under siege, cowering and persecuted by racist pressures. It means that the individual's development is entirely jeopardized by the racial oppression to which he or she is subjected. That argument has been ratified by Bento

(2009, p. 54) in studies dedicated to the phenomenon of "Whitening" where he reveals: "Black militancy has persistently stressed the difficulty posed by racial identification as an element that denounces low self-esteem and that hampers black people's organization against racial discrimination".

It must be stressed that discrimination also manifests itself institutionally. Institutions are present in human activities not just in the fields of work but also in education, health, culture, social assistance and access to justice among others. In that aspect, according to Hasenbalg (1992), racism is present in all stages of a black or other non-white individual's life cycle in Brazil; it permeates everything that has to do with the construction of society itself: family, school, work, and others and so it is incumbent on the school and the educators to be on the alert for it, considering that in all such spheres of daily life, institutional violence is present. The institutions' agents are guilty of omission when they fail to set in motion mechanisms to combat the reproduction of racist values or when they commit discriminatory acts against the groups.

We can cite some example of the reproduction of values: 1) in the family: the idea of that its hair is "no good" is passed on to a child early in life and from the moment they learn to speak children are exposed to stereotyped images of black and other non-white people (Hasenbalg, 1992); 2) in school: in the interactions between the student and the white teacher where the small child readily perceives the differentiated treatment and greater degree of affection directed at the white children, and the naturalness of the teacher's physical contact with them manifest in affectionate touches or embraces (Cavalleiro, 2003); and 3) in work and incomes: [...] data published by the Office of the Public Prosecutor of the Labor Courts show that in 2005, in the Federal District branches of Brazil's five leading private banks, the proportion of Afro-Brazilian employees was a mere 19% and their average salaries were around 55% of that of the white employees even though the schooling levels of the former were no lower than those of the latter (Jaccoud, 2008).

Given all the facts set out above, the discussion on racial relations must necessarily involve not only the discriminated minorities but also those privileged individuals, groups and institutions that actually give vent to a racism-impregnated discourse, even though it be in a silent fashion (Bento, 2009). That points to the need for work to be unfolded in the classrooms capable of combating that discourse. In that regard, we understand the school to be a particularly privileged space in the formative process of the student, with its task of transmitting knowledge, in which the need for racial relations education is allied to the need to break with the an inherited education model that has historically been based on the universalization and construction of but a single culture. That means it is necessary to create alternatives that contemplate an anti-racism education.

Racism, the student and the school

Recent studies on racism and education issues, especially those targeting the insertion of blacks and whites in school spaces, clearly identify the existence of racism and its role as a promoter of inequality and discriminatory treatment inside schools (Cavalleiro, 2001; Bento, 2006). In the same direction, contemporary authors, in their analyses of the ideological aspects of teaching materials currently in use, identify the presence of relations of racial inequality in them (Pinto, 1987; Gomes, N., 1996; Silva, 2008).

That means that the engagement of the state and its institutions is absolutely essential to any deconstruction of prejudice. In such a scenario, the school must play a vital role, seeking to form active subjects with a critical sense, denying and countering deep-rooted racial prejudice and always on the alert and open to proposing debates and reflections on anti-racism postures and practices.

The enactment of Federal Law nº 10.639/03 (Brasil, 2003) was a step in that direction insofar as it determines, among other things, that all establishments offering basic education, whether public or private, must include the subject of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in their curricula. It represents a contribution towards fostering racial equality by inserting the theme into educators' agendas and thereby promoting discussions on race, prejudice, discrimination, racism, and valuing the Afro-Brazilian population. The Law also added to the provisions of

its Article 26-A to the text of the National Education Guidelines and Bases Act (Brasil, 2010) and it creates the conditions for effective acceptance and implementation insofar as it does not run counter to any constitutional principles. Alongside the terms of the 1988 Federal Constitution (Brasil, 2010a), that article of the law, which makes teaching Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory, is effectively creating a public policy and materializing an instrument capable of responding to the social demands being made especially by the black social movements and civil society.

In turn the insertion of education addressing human rights issues is already becoming a reality in Brazil, as witness the National Human Right Education Plan and the National Plan for Promoting Racial Equality, which specifically contemplate the confrontation of all forms of discrimination and stimulate the inclusion of the question of race in the school curricula (Brasil, 2009; 2009a). However, the existence of the legal text will only actually become transformed into an effective right in every school community insofar as the respective schools promote practices directed at recognizing and valuing ethnic-racial diversity.

Methodology

The descriptive exploratory research using a qualitative approach was conducted in 2011, in an urban government-run school in the Federal District and involved six classes of students engaged in Young People and Adult Education. The sample consisted of six educators and ninety students drawn from morning and night classes of the same school, all engaged in fundamental (primary and lower secondary) education.

The original intention was to listen to what black students had to say by forming focal groups and conducting interviews but the opportunity arose to also form a focal group of their teachers and thus make it possible confront the two sets of information, one gathered from students, and the other from teachers.

In regard to the student profile, they were aged 18 to 70 and studying at the lower secondary education level (grades 5 to 8).

Four of the teachers were male and two females. All were permanently employed and had been teaching in that particular teaching mode (young people and adults) for at least ten years. All of them had teaching degrees and two were studying for a Masters at the time. Their teaching areas were: Portuguese Language, History and Geography.

The data gathered was transcribed and submitted to content analysis of the type proposed by Bardin (2009), who set out the fundamental stages to be unfolded, namely, pre-analysis, exploring the material and treating the results. As stated above, the main goal of the work was to identify the existence of racial violence in the area of Young People and Adult Education and what the school does to overcome it.

Analysis and Discussion of the Results

Cavaleiro (2001) has stated that racial issues are not always taken into account in the course of professional activity so that in the daily round of school life, the agents are not always aware that the persistent presence of prejudices is a problem.

Based on that reflection, among the six classes that were targeted, only one declared that the theme of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture was addressed in class. The teacher in that case, contextualized the respective classes using written texts, holding debates and later getting the students to produce their own texts. For that same class group, however, the theme was not addressed by the teachers of the other study areas nor was it addressed at all in the other classes. Two of the focal group teachers alleged that they have too little time available to handle all the contents they are supposed to address and their other colleagues agreed with them:

(...) we do not address the theme of the Negro very often because the Department has determined so many contents for us to work with (...), but in November, we do address it on National Black Consciousness Day (History teacher, aged 47).

Another teacher, referring to Black Consciousness Day as the day the

school "elects" to discuss racial issues states that:

When the school commemorates Black Consciousness Day, we see, for example that the black girls come to school looking prettier, with their hair smoothed straight, that is to say they take more pride in themselves (Geography teacher, aged 32).

Those statements abound in concepts charged with prejudice, not only in the aspect of the space conceded for discussion of racial issues, limited to that single day, but especially in what the teacher sees as Negro beauty. Using the term with their hair smoothed out and associating that to beauty ratified stereotyped ways of addressing the theme.

It should be noted that November 20 was instituted as Black Consciousness Day as far back as 1971, but its formal introduction into the school calendar was achieved by the enactment of Act nº 10.639/2003 revealing concern to introduce into school routines a commemorative date that would be representative for the black population, considering that the school calendar is replete with Eurocentric representations like Easter week, the June Festival, Brazilian Independence day and others.

The teacher's statements reveal quite clearly that almost a decade after the enactment of Federal Law nº 10.639/2003 it is still far from coming into force. The quotation above raises the following question: is one day a year really enough to work on student awareness and to demystify the negative vision they have of African culture and the African peoples? That negative vision was exemplified in the comment of one 39 year-old student in the focal group engaged in grade 6-level studies: "I think there is lots of extreme poverty in Africa".

Apart from confirming that the theme of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture is not generally addressed at all, the students that took part in the research all agreed that there were indeed racist and discriminatory manifestations directed against blacks in the school environment on the part of fellow-students and teachers alike:

Some colleagues call me the black girl with frizzy hair. Sometimes I do feel excluded from the group just for being black. The teacher could see what was happening but never took any action or adopted any stance to address the fact (Interview, Grade 5-level student, aged 28).

The student's statement reveal that there is racial discrimination that is actively expressed and there is that which is expressed in the form of omission because the teacher's failure to take a stance clearly shows how much racial discrimination is passively assimilated in the daily routines of schools. There were various examples of students' complaints registering the prejudice directed against black students:

For example, I have heard teachers telling racist jokes in the classroom, but there was nothing I could do about it (Focal group, student studying at grade 6 level, aged 32).

That confirms the information obtained by research into prejudice and discrimination in schools undertaken in 2009 by the Economic Research Institute Foundation at the request of the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Research and Studies which showed that everyone involved in the school community, ranging from parents to teachers, practices some kind of discrimination. 99.3% of parents, students and school staff have some kind of prejudice which may be ethnic-racial, socio-economic, gender-based, generational, territorial, associated to sexual orientation, or directed at handicapped people with special needs.

In the conversations held with students there were various accounts of discriminatory practices in the school environment. In the focal group of teachers there was glaring insensitivity to racial discrimination issues. Generally speaking teachers were focused on routine questions and their obligation to "transmit subject contents" and with that they have become insensitive to racial questions present in the daily life of the school.

Within the scope of the investigation into the aspect of overcoming racial discrimination in the classroom, it was found that only one of

the teachers carried out any kind of orientation work with her students. This Portuguese language teacher had gained the respect of her students and motivated them to reflect on racial issues, racism, discrimination and racial prejudice.

Inspired by that teacher's example and firmly believing in teachers' potential to contribute to overcoming racist violence in schools, the researchers have dedicated the following spaces to the presentation of some of what they consider to be satisfactory declarations on the issue in question proffered by students in the classes that were investigated:

The teacher presents the History of Africa to us little by little while at the same time calling on us to break with the prejudices that we carry within us right from our family origins. Nowadays I have more black friends (Semi-structured interview, student in grade 6 –level education aged 35 night school)

I am a black but I must admit that it was only after the teacher's work that I began to understand the History of Africa. I have been in this teacher's class since last year and as far as I can make out, this work is a personal commitment of the teacher's, discussing prejudice in class. (Focal Group, student in Grade 6-level education, aged 35, night school)

The work carried out this semester has been very important with several relevant topics for our future and our moral formation. We have learned to respect people as equals, with no discrimination or prejudice. [...] It was wonderful work; I really like Mumba so much, and the work on racism (Interview, student in grade 6-level education, aged 29, night school).

Before I started studying with Teacher M, I had no idea there was still so much racism in Brazil. I have learned so much from her; how strong the blacks are in fighting for their rights and I intend to be one of them (Focal group student, grade 5-level education, morning school).

The experience I had with this work we did on Nairobi; that was what enabled me to see that we must not be racists and that we need to value Negro people more. [...] I learned to see a side of prejudice that I never knew before and I also found it all the more interesting because I learned how to see myself and accept myself as I am (Focal group student, grade 5-level education, night school).

In synthesis, it can be seen from the statements set out above that the students expressed what they had learned, speaking of the importance of adopting antiracism practices in their daily lives, widening their knowledge and contributing to constructing solutions for collective problems. The statements also clearly delineate the educator's critical importance in the students' formative processes not only

in the aspect of developing their skills and competencies but also, and above all, in fostering sociability and respect for diversity thereby contributing towards the achievement of a fairer and more egalitarian society.

The need to construct a new way of looking at education has been clearly stated by Freire (1996). That author highlights the importance of love and its life-transforming powers in teaching/learning relations; the importance of exchanges, of the collective sphere, of partnership in education, of sharing with the other: the dialogue, the word, humility, meeting and re-meeting, authentic thinking, respect for the individual and the differences and the culture of each and every one.

Nevertheless, as Chagas (2008) has warned, care must be taken when addressing the theme of Afro-Brazilian culture to work to achieve one of the objectives set out in the respective law, namely, not to reproduce the idea of the inferiority Africa and Africans or of Afro-Brazilians but instead to make sure to develop the students' critical sense with the intention of constructing a different image. To the compulsoriness decreed by the State must be added the commitment and responsibility of the teacher.

Final Remarks

The racist violence that unfolds so apparently naturally inside schools needs to be viewed and treated in the same way as other forms of violence and the respective provisions of the various Laws, especially Federal Law nº 10.639/2003 need to be enforced and respected.

In the 21st century, with the implementation of the legislation in question, an effort is being made to place the racial issue squarely in the midst of basic education. However it is important to underscore that its purpose goes beyond the mere acquisition of new study contents on the part of students. The fact of the Law's enactment in itself is insufficient; it is necessary to advance and make sure that racism and its consequences are effectively countered in practice in order to guarantee successful learning on the part of discriminated groups, especially black people irrespective of whether they are in regular schooling or studying in special modes of education like Young People and Adult Education. To that end it is essential that the school should actively participate, mirroring the society it is inserted in, delineating the model it wishes to reproduce and the kind of citizen it wishes to qualify.

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