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RACE, CLASS AND EDUCATION: defying hegemonic process of inequalities

Raça, classe e educação: desafiando processo hegemônico de desigualdades

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ABSTRACT: Based on the fact that education is a symbolic and prestigious property in Brazilian society, we discuss, in this study, how class and race influence the way minorities learn. Having in mind that discourse constructs identities, systems of knowledge and beliefs, organizes and structures the people's relations (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001 [1992]), it becomes imperative to understand language from a critical analysis that links discourse to ideology and power. In this sense, Life History becomes an important investigative tool, capable of understanding how social institutions collaborate in the creation of beliefs that directly influence the relation of the social actors, dragging them into specific identity positions. Class and race constitute impediments to a better education for minorities in Brazil. So it is necessary to invest in teacher education so that, once they have contact with critical theories, they can become aware of the complexity involved in the educational practice, resulting, consequently, in the formation of critical students, capable of resisting injustices that put them into a position of social disadvantage in Brazilian society.

KEYWORDS: Teaching and Learning. Discourse and Ideology. Identity.

RESUMO: Com base no fato de que a educação é uma propriedade simbólica e de prestígio na sociedade brasileira, discutimos, neste estudo, como a classe e a raça influenciam o modo como as minorias aprendem. Tendo em mente que o discurso constrói identidades, sistemas de conhecimento e crenças, organiza e estrutura as relações das pessoas (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001 [1992]), torna-se imperativo compreender a linguagem a partir de uma análise crítica que liga o discurso à ideologia e ao poder. Nesse sentido, a História de Vida torna-se uma importante ferramenta de investigação, capaz de entender como as instituições sociais colaboram na criação de crenças que influenciam diretamente a relação dos atores sociais, arrastando-os para posições de identidade específicas. Classe e raça constituem impedimentos para uma educação melhor para as minorias no Brasil. Portanto, é necessário investir na formação de professores para que, uma vez que tenham contato com teorias críticas, possam conscientizar a complexidade envolvida na prática educacional, resultando, conseqüentemente, na formação de estudantes críticos, capazes de resistir às injustiças que colocam eles estão em posição de desvantagem social na sociedade brasileira.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino e Aprendizagem. Discurso e Ideologia. Identidade

1. INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian educational policies, more specifically, in this paper, those regarding to teaching foreign languages³ seem not to regard public

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³ In Brazil, the English Language takes the lead in the teaching process. But there are other foreign languages that compete with English such as Spanish, French, Italian, German and other hundreds of Indigenous languages, etc. These other languages are majority in bordering states and in places where there are many groups of immigrants or native people





schools worthy of receiving an effective teaching. It is known by the lack of financial support in such institutions. In most teaching spaces, there are not suitable places for teaching and learning a foreign language. For example, the curriculum needs reformulations; the classrooms are not equipped with the necessary learning devices such as computers, internet, among other pedagogical supports. In addition, there is a great number of students per classrooms, about 45 students attending classes, and, in most cases, teachers are not fluent in the language they teach. These are only some problems that afflict public education in Brazil. The questions we bring in this paper and to which we try to respond are: who are the students who attend such teaching institutions? Which classes and races do they belong to? The answer seems to be simple: many students are from low-income classes. In terms of race, they are *pardos*⁴ and/or black. So, a more direct answer is that most of them are poor and black.

To comprehend the link between class and race, it is necessary to understand the process of colonialism in Brazil. This process gives us some insight into the joint of these two categories. The colonialism in Brazil was fierce to Africans and continues being to their descendent. Nowadays, through a more subtle tact called racism, black people are discriminated against every minute in their lives. Although black people in Brazil, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE, totalize more than a half of the population, they don't receive equal treatment or attention if compared to white people in services related to areas such as education, healthcare, housing, employment and others. Among these areas, education is our focus in this paper. In the next sections, we will discuss the relation between discourse, context and identity and its consequences for the educational process. Afterwards, we will present some points we consider important to fight back racism and to build a new pattern of society that respect every human being in their human aspects.

(the Indians). By the Brazilian Educational law, in these places, the community can choose the foreign language to be taught.

⁴ A Brazilian definition for people of light dark skin color.





2. DISCOURSE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

According to Fairclough (2003), discourse plays a central role in creating the social reality we make part of. But in order to create the social reality, the discourse has to act dialogically with social structures. It is only in the middle of social structures that orders of discourse definitively influence the way we perceive ourselves and others. This perception, though, is built upon a system of beliefs and knowledge that is responsible for producing the collective unconscious through a process of acts of speech whose fuel is 'repetition' (AUSTIN, 1995 [1962]; DERRIDA, 1991). When some speeches are constantly repeated in any social environment, it can give people the impression that something is 'normal' and/or 'natural' and, therefore, taken for granted. Language directly influences the manner people view things, contributing to the way we make up our mind and establish our social relations. In this sense, discourse is intrinsically associated with ideology and power, which is, according to Thompson (1984), the way discourse means the world. Specifically, in social structures, discourse is synonymous with orders of discourse: it sustains the power of hegemonic groups. Inextricably linked to power, ideology, according to Thompson's view, plays a central role in the discursive materialization because it hits the consensus of subordinate groups, in most cases, keeping them tied to specific identity positions.

On the other hand, ideology can be seen as a mechanism for subordinate groups to resist given identity positions. Understanding the way ideology and power act in discursive traits can be an important point for resistance. A language education⁵ could lead people or/and groups in social disadvantage to understand how their identity positions are constructed in discourse. It also could lead those people to project a new and

⁵ When we say 'language education', we mean that it is the first step to resist to social disadvantages. The process of identification to recognize identity positions can be stronger if the person/group is aware of the mechanisms of exclusion promoted by the discourse of those in hegemonic positions.





more powerful identity: but an identity built upon constant struggles and resistance.

In the next section we will discuss the relation among discourse, context and identity.

3. DISCOURSE, CONTEXT AND IDENTITY

It is widely known that context plays a crucial role in understanding the social reality in any given society. In Brazilian society, for example, the way Africans were treated in the colonialism period can shed a light into the way they have been treated nowadays. At the slavery times, obliged to work in subhuman conditions, black men and women were demeaned in their state of being humans. Demeaning black people was internalized by the collective unconscious as something normal, something natural. Consequently, the color of the skin became a property in Brazilian society: white skin color as the 'norm' produced the difference (the black skin color).

After the abolition of slavery, the Brazilian state did little to repair the social gap between blacks and whites. The descendents of Africans had to strive to live. So, the black people were pushed into 'abject places' (BAUMAN 2005, p. 45) in which disempowered identities have no possibilities to make choices. For a long time there has been overt discrimination against African descendents in almost all social areas in the Brazilian society. But since 1950, group of black intellectuals have politically engaged in discussion about the social and political places reserved for them and since then, there have been many gains. In Brazil, nowadays, for example, there are many educational policies engaged to eradicate racism and its roots: the Human Right National Programs I and II are good examples of the success of the struggles of Brazilian black people. The Human Right National Programs I and II empower black people not only in the educational area but also in both civil and political spheres. The law 10.639/03 made mandatory the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in Brazilian





public school curricula. The Resolution 01/04 of the National Education Counsel regulates the National Education Guidelines for the teaching of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture. In addition, there are other documents that regulate the Brazilian educational system such as LDB and PCNs, among others.

Despite the social and political gains, the black movement has yet much to struggle against because the discourse has found another ways to confine minor identities to 'abject places', places 'predestined' for them, according to the collective unconscious. In the past, there was overt discrimination but nowadays, overt discrimination has given place to a kind of subtler discursive identity representation. In Brazilian society, for example, social mass media relates white people to prestigious job positions while black people are related to lower job positions. In soap operas and films, the majority of people having a prominent role are white. In propagandas on TV commercials, doctors are white, engineers are white, judges are white, politicians are white, and teachers are white. On television, if there is an interview or something related to the public opinion, the interviewee (and her/his profession written in subtitles) is shown up: once again, the white one is the doctor while the black one is the housewife and/or the doorman, etc. In addition, black people are frequently showed up related to the world of crime and/or in a state of extreme poverty.

In schools, the teaching pedagogical materials (textbooks, for example), according to researches of Santos (2013), Barros (2013) and Ferreira (2013), among others, present an essentialized conception of identity which, through ideological purposes, sustain relations of power of hegemonic groups/individuals on others. In general, these textbooks show people (white ones) traveling around the world, visiting unusual places, and, to communicate, they talk in more than one language. They are associated with good jobs and are always smiling. It does not reflect the reality of many black Brazilians who, in most cases, do not speak the foreign language they are supposed to and do not have the proper financial conditions to travel around the world in order to visit 'unusual places'. No





wonder, this is the way identities are produced and reproduced every day by Brazilian society. The questions we bring now are: how do black people identify themselves to an identity that portrays their physical appearance and culture in a negative way? How do black people grow a stronger self esteem if they are constantly related to lower position jobs, world of crime and/or in a situation of extreme poverty? Once identities are produced and reproduced in discourse, it is through discourse that it must be deconstructed. In other words, if an identity is produced negatively and ratified by social structures such as school, family, friends, etc. it is through those means of communication of such social institutions that a deconstruction must occur. But, for it to happen, it is necessary a language education capable to make groups/individuals (in a position of social disadvantage) to analyze their position in order to resist such given social place. Since the goal of this paper is to talk about the consequences of class and race for the process of education, in the next chapter, we will discuss some of these implications.

4. Race, Class, Identity and Education

Due to the process of colonialism and its heritage to the Brazilian society, it is very difficult to separate class from race. The black people, after receiving their 'freedom', continued living in subhuman conditions yet. The Brazilian state did little to include millions of thousands of 'former slaves' in the Brazilian society. Instead of employing black people to the sugar cane and coffee plantations (former slaves' jobs), the Brazilian government made it easy for Europeans to come to Brazil to work in the former slaves' jobs. As consequence millions of Europeans came to Brazil. It was racism that motivated the Brazilian government let Europeans to occupy the former slaves' jobs. In other words, it was racism against black skin color that motivated a process called 'whitening' in Brazilian society.

During the first republic, black people did not have political rights yet. To take part in politics it was necessary to be literate. In this way, the blacks





were pushed into a deeper extreme poverty. Without jobs and other social assistances, many African descendents were obliged to work in subhuman conditions. For many, the situation was equal or worse to those in former 'slavery societies'. Having to work to financially support their family, the children had no time for education. Neither had their parents and, illiterate, they became victim of a cycle of identity reproduction. A reproduction based on negative social representation. The Brazilian after-slavery society was even more marked by pushing the black people into a social place 'predestined' for them: a place of illiteracy, crime and submission.

Without education, healthcare, jobs and political representation, the Afro-Brazilian people had to strive to survive on their own, but how? They had to fight for political rights. So, groups of black intellectuals fought for political rights and got them since 1934. Education has been viewed by the black movement as a bridge among classes in Brazilian society. Brazilian black intellectuals have emphasized the importance of education to have access to other material and symbolic resources. In this sense, since 1980, much has been discussed in the field of curriculum and identity. Black Intellectuals have denounced the role of Brazilian public education in reproducing inequalities related to race and class. Even after the creation of some educational documents [cited before] and fifteen years since the enactment of the Law 10.639/2003 that made mandatory the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in Brazilian public school, we have seen very little educational changes related to the empowerment of black people in Brazil. The problem is the lack of incentives of educational polices related to adequate teacher training. In this respect, it is important to train teachers based on the field of applied linguistics so that they can better understand how discourse creates systems of knowledge and beliefs that somehow result in structuring the social relations of people. Teachers who better understand which mechanisms discourses use to reproduces social inequalities can better develop student's awareness to fight ideologies that marginalize and put them in social disadvantage. By resisting such ideologies, black students can be proud of their difference and, in this way,





project for themselves and for their families a better social place in which their identities are respected and included. In the next section, we discuss more about this topic.

5. DEFYING HEGEMONIC PROCESS OF INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION

The conception of education we have in mind is the same of Apple's (1995). It has a critical perspective that conceives of education as a process linked to relations of power. In this sense, we understand that classrooms are places where identities are constantly produced and reproduced by acts of speeches. By the conception of education that guide our comprehension of teaching, we also understand that the process of production, distribution and consuming of pedagogical materials are embedded in relations of power that directly produce and reproduce social inequalities related to class and race. So, it is extremely important for teachers to have a critical eye upon the classrooms and on what is going on in such formal places of teaching in order to not forget that classrooms are places that ratify hegemonic process of inequalities.

Considering classrooms as a place that engages social actors and their identities, teachers have to ponder who the students that make part of that place are. As discussed here, a great part of the students from public school are black. And in Brazilian context, blackness is socially constructed as synonymous with disempowered people. In this way, teachers must critically analyze their teaching in order to not ratify hegemonic structures that oppress minorities. To defy hegemonic structures, it is necessary an approach that denounces social injustices and inequalities. An effective method to reach such understanding is listening to the life histories of those who have been pushed into marginalized positions. In this way, life history becomes an important investigative tool, capable of understanding how social institutions collaborate in the creation of beliefs that directly





influence the relation of social actors, dragging them into specific identity positions.



The untold histories, written and spoken by those whose will to choose a better place in society has been cut off can be the heart of the matter for reconstructing a new inclusive Brazilian education. By denouncing oppression and social injustices, life history can set a new agenda for the curricula of public education in Brazil. In this way, instead of ratifying hegemonic structures in which the 'whiteness' is the norm, schools can make the counter-discourse in positively promoting the image of Afro-Brazilian people. In this sense, schools, when adopt a critical reflection on how 'the norm' constructs the difference, adopt a critical perspective of education based on the socio-interactionism. In this perspective, students discursively engage in the construction of knowledge. It means that the pedagogical contents are chosen in order to make students act in the world. In other words, the contents are chosen in order to develop students' critical literacy.

According to Ladson-Billing (1995), a culturally relevant pedagogy is a kind of education whose goal is to empower students to act in the world 'intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically'. In order to achieve it, the theorist (op.cit) points out that cultural referents are necessary because they have the power to impact positively the process of identification of students from low-income classes. Ladson-Billings suggests that these cultural referents must be included in the curricula of any pedagogy that claims itself critical. Kubota (2004), in the same line of thinking, introduces a kind of education based on the critical multiculturalism. According to her, this concept is important because it empowers students belonging to minorities groups. The researcher affirms that multiculturalism reflects critically on the construction of knowledge, on some educational practices, and on discourses and textbooks. In this sense, the difference is not taken for granted as something normal and natural, but problematized as being socially, historically and culturally constructed in the relations of power. When minority groups recognize how relations of powers create the





difference, they can develop resistance to some identity position and create for themselves identities of identification and of project (CASTELLS, 2010).

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper, we discussed how class and race interferes in the process of education of minority groups in Brazilian society. We pointed out to a kind of critical education, capable of deconstruct hegemonic identities that are produced in the relations of power. More important in the process of education is a good teacher training based on a language education. It can enable teachers to capture the importance of how discourse and context influence in the construction of some identity positions and how these predefined identities can influence on the process of teaching and learning languages. A kind of education that privileges critical thinking (instead of ratifying a process of hegemonic identity) gives room to the culture of minorities, their way of being, promoting, in this way, a process of identification that can generate proud and a sense of belonging. In this kind of education, the linguistic contents, instead of approaching a standardized language only, could give place to other languages, the languages of minorities, creating, in this way, a process of mental identification and, as consequence, spontaneous speeches. The classroom, instead of having drills and repetition only, could give voice to students to discuss their difference in a relevant and responsible way.

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