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## Education and education practices among quilombolas: the school and the cultural diversity

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### Abstract

This text examines different aspects of the discussion on the disconnection between teaching and its practices and contents vs. the cultural diversity within the contexts it operates. Among these aspects one should highlight the types of comprehension and construing of the world, as these map our notions of Education and Culture and take place within an interconnected way. Here, we take as the basis for reference the study on culture and educational activities reflecting specific ways to understand and construe the world, within a quilombola community (black community) in Brazil.

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Key Words: Cultural diversity; school organization; quilombo's education; culture and education.

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### 1. Introduction

This text examines different aspects of the discussion on the disconnection between teaching and its practices and contents vs. the cultural diversity within the contexts it operates. Among these aspects one should highlight the types of comprehension and construing of the world, as these map our notions of Education and Culture and take place within an interconnected way (Aguiar, 2010).

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Here, we take as the basis for reference the study on culture and educational activities reflecting specific ways to understand and construe the world, within a quilombola community (black community) in Brazil.

The cultural practices in this community, which delineate their way of life, express the disconnection that exists between them and the contents of school practices. In the quilombola's daily activities – as they live in a rural area relatively close to the urban environment – education incorporates different knowing and merges different knowledge. Traditional resources mixed with other resources from modern days are used as teaching tools and as resources that help older people to spread and instill knowledge, therefore helping younger people to explore and adapt to the world around them.

It is worth mentioning that most adults in the community know very little or have no formal learning. Yet, they know how important school is and its influence on modern life, and they use this understanding to forge these two worlds of knowledge and recognition – the knowing from its practices and what comes from younger people learning at school.

Community data were collected 'in loco' during our work and field research, having as our basic procedures our research and observation, using ethnography as our fundamental methodology.

The notions of education and cultural diversity discussed here may inspire educators, researchers and parents who have an interest in issues associated to learning and its system(s) – which are different issues that afflict those involved with this field of knowledge and which are usually translated into searches, exchanges and reflections.

#### Multiculturalism: some definitions

A discussion we consider important is how the cultural difference has been studied by authors that discuss it within society and in the environment of our close interest, the school. Moreira (2002) highlights that the word 'multicultural' has been used to indicate the pluralistic characteristic of western societies today, and the different types of responses to such plurality. He quotes Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), who consider the "multiculturalism" represents the nature of such response, which includes formulating conflicting definitions in our social world, arising from different economic, political and social interests." For Moreira, within the realm of education, multiculturalism relates to the nature of the response that is given within the school environment.

Stuart Hall (2003) considers that multiculturalism can be both a qualitative and a substantive term. While qualitative, it describes the social characteristics and the movement of maintaining the original identity and life in common within a society where communities with different culture live together. While substantive refers to the political strategies used to manage the cultural differences in these societies.

Some authors, including Astrain (2003), make a distinction between multiculturalism and interculturality and highlight that the latter is not just about two cultures that are mixed together or that integrate. The interculturality is about the recognition of these existing differences and the mutual understanding and valuation of the different social groups irrespectively of their specific cultures. The prefix “inter” would express a positive intention that is concretely expressed by the effort to suppress barriers between different peoples, ethnic communities and human groups.

The discussion about cultural differences at school has taken differences nuances, ranging from the issue of mere acceptance and the respect for the culture brought by students and their families to questioning the originality of such culture and its handling by the media. Moreira (2002) refers to the critical multiculturalism showing the relations of power that are present when one discusses the different cultures that exist in social institutions. He reports that “by accepting that the cultural difference and power are intimately related, there is a need to reject, as done by Stoer and Cortesão (1999), the so-called benign multiculturalism. Such perspective is restricted to identifying the differences and encouraging the respect, tolerance and coexistence between them. He does not include, in his approach, the purpose of destabilizing the relations of power involved in situations where differences coexist. The effort to examine them and question them characterizes what has been called the critical multiculturalism.”

Within the critical multiculturalism perspective is the discussion about the pattern of interaction of different players within the school institution. Different interacting cultures bring aspects that are connected to patterns of the politically right that are present in the task of teaching, just as values that are connected to the everyday life of families, students and teachers and values and principles brought by the media and by the dominant ideology. Therefore, the critical multiculturalism proposes a reflection that will allow us to address different cultures and explain existing contradictions, either accepting or refuting these interactive patterns that, above all, are based on negotiation and mutual respect.

From these questioning by the authors discussed here and the observation and exchange with the target community (as well as other herein mentioned), we started to follow the reflection about the reality experienced by those living in the quilombolas, particularly the practices related to the process of sharing and acquiring knowledge, which are distant from those used by schools.

### Sharing knowledge in the quilombola community

An event told by people living in the quilombola community is explanatory by itself. During a school test for children at about eight years of age, there is the following question that the student is expected to fill in: snake is a \_\_\_\_\_ animal. A child fills in “dangerous” but his answer was considered wrong because the correct answer would be “venomous”.

Although this is an example of what could take place at any school, it shows the that there is a disconnection between the school and the student cultural universe or the knowledge the student brings with him to school, or from learning within the environment he lives. It is as if only what the school proposes were right; the answer that was considered to be wrong is laughable; and the school fails to teach that there are many ways to define a snake or any other thing or animal. Additionally and most significantly, is that the school instills prejudice in relation to other ways to understand and construe our world.

On the part of those living in the quilombola community, some social practices express the way they understand how knowledge is shared and learned. An example of these practices can be seen on a yard in the village, where children and adults leave several toys, including broken toys. In many instances, when they return from school, children get together to play at that site and, as they play, one can see their effort to fix a broken toy. It is common for adults to get engaged and help them fix the toys while there is a lot of talking going around.

During this activity, adults teach, in oral conversations, information about their way of life, about Brazil and the quilombo history; about life in general and the processes experienced. During these conversions, sometimes there is an education about the need to squander, sometimes there are historical facts about some specific toy and the memory of people and times that are, in one way or another, associated to that specific toy. Historical data are brought up: sometimes old names of some toys, that have changed and children did not know, and that are used as a source of references about the way of life, where people can make their own toys or can give it to others without having to buy it.

Sometimes they speak about how important it is not to throw toys away, even those that are broken, so that other children can play with them; sometimes about the type of tree that has provided wood to make some specific toy and the importance of taking care of the forests and nature. As a result, reflections come up, involving most different themes, building the fabric, for the

benefit of children and youths, that depicts life in that place and the way they manage their everyday issues. Punctuated by facts from the history they have lived, where empirical data mingle together. These are procedures that express their beliefs about their way of life and consumption models, highlighting consumption values that govern the community relation with objects, people and the place.

As a quick clipping, follows some important historical details, taken from official data and which are also taught by adults to younger people.

Adults explain, for instance, the meaning of several words or terms that are a part of their cultural universe. Like quilombo, that comes from "ochilombo", from a Bantu dialect, that is today spoken by some peoples in Angola, from where most Brazilian slaves came. It used to mean a camp used by nomad populations. In Brazil, it was used as a name for nuclei of slave resistance." (www.mds.gov.br)

They try to give long explanations about their origins and strengthen the importance of this knowledge and give several representative examples to children. Children listen actively and appear curious by asking questions on the subject. And they learn that quilombolas "are descendents from the inhabitants of quilombos. Most of them formed by black slaves that managed to escape from slavery in Brazil at the time. They ran away from sugarcane mills or coffee plantations and took refuge in the quilombos, sites of resistance and protection. Old slaves formed communities around these nuclei; and the communities of today, over one hundred years after slavery was abolished, have been named quilombolas, the areas of quilombolas or the territories of quilombolas". (www.mds.gov.br)

They show the importance of community life, tell about the significance of building family ties and highlight the social process their ancestors went through so that they could be where they are today. One of the adults, member of the community, is graduated in History and in his explanation, historical and official data are taught to children in a formal and candid way when he speaks about the quilombola communities. He draws a Brazilian map on the ground and shows, by state or region, where there is, and still remains, to this date, a number of communities that are self-proclaimed quilombolas.

"Quilombola communities are ethnical-racial groups, according to self-attributed criteria, with their own historic trajectory, owners of specific territorial relations and with a black ancestry associated to a resistance to the historic oppression they suffered, according to Decree nº 4887/03. These communities are the rightful owners of their lands, as consecrated by the Federal Constitution of 1988. [...] An assessment by Fundação Cultural Palmares (FCP) has mapped 3524 quilombola communities in Brazil. There are other sources, however, that estimate that there are approximately 5 thousand communities." (www.cpisp.org.br)

“Quilombos do not belong to our slavery past. Neither are they communities that stand alone in time and space, without any participation in our social culture. [...] Quite contrarily, there are over 2 thousand quilombola communities throughout the Brazilian territory, which are alive and active, fighting for their right to be the owner of their lands, as provided by the Federal Constitution of 1988.” ([www.cpisp.org.br](http://www.cpisp.org.br))

“There are quilombola communities in at least 24 Brazilian states: Amazonas, Alagoas, Amapá, Bahia, Ceará, Espírito Santo, Goiás, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Pará, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Paraná, Piauí, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Norte, Rio Grande do Sul, Rondônia, Santa Catarina, São Paulo, Sergipe and Tocantins”. ([www.cpisp.org.br](http://www.cpisp.org.br))

In one of the activities at a quilombola community, several people, while mixing earth, water, grass or fresh cattle manure to get a uniform, strong mass that is used to make large bricks or walls of a “taipa” or “pau-a-pique” house, sing tones, like in a choir and they also get together in long conversations, a time they use to introduce subjects of general interest that are important to the community. During the time they knead clay with their feet, children get involved, and they talk and laugh together. During this activity, one can see men and women engaged with the task of teaching and learning about their past and looking into their future.

Actually, this is about a class with many teachers, it very different from the one children experience at school, at a site that is also very different from the school facilities; where everything takes place on the ground, as they play with their props. Historical data are shared among all those present. Some subjects draw special interest and everyone gets involved in the discussion when the subject is slavery, language and beliefs, or the role of women, allowing them to show the different realities they experience, in different places, by many quilombolas in Brazil.

Regarding their language, for instance, one can highlight that “many quilombolas have their own language, formed by merging different dialects of black slaves brought from Africa with Portuguese. Like Cupópia, from Quilombo de Cafundó, in Salto de Pirapora, in São Paulo State countryside. This language was extensively logged, for the first time, in 1978, when it had 40 speakers. Today there are 12 speakers of Cupópia among 80 people living in the Cafundó.” (Vogt and Fry, 1996)

General notes

Concerned with the technology advances and disappointed with the urban cultural universe, several members of the quilombola community claim that children education should not be delegated to school only. They believe that as children and young people mature before their adult lives, they need to tread different paths and this requires dedication and time from adults and the community. And school can only offer one form of learning.

The activities performed by groups of people in the community, for instance, to perform tough and/or urgent tasks that require focus and objectiveness, can lead to visible inner changes in those involved, who learn to share their tasks, work collaboratively, leading to stronger social ties. It strengthens the notion of who we are, as we are similar and different at the same time. It shows that each one has a role in the life of the other, in a mix that strengthens, teaches and encourages people while preparing them to accept the different, their quests and struggles.

Through manifestations of culture and their practices, which permeate our relation with the other, is that one can imprint the way and the measure to experience the world that surrounds us. One understands, respect and values what is best known.

Expanding traditionally established limits to teaching and learning concepts increasingly requires an articulation between the educational processes and the socio-cultural conceptions. Identifying and understanding the ways of life and construe the world, as these are present in different social fabrics, by making visible the elements that associate culture and education, one may open new ways for educational proceedings that are more suited to people's needs. The dynamic characteristic of our social relations, along with social-educational proceedings, performed in the daily lives, involving the exchange of knowledge, is a rich and promising field for essential information, so that one can define the socio-cultural and political role of school and education. (Aguiar, 1994)

Knowledge plays a key role for human choices. For educators and researchers, expanding knowledge about different ways of life opens space for new inspirations and creativity, therefore strengthening adequacy to the context in which school works. Education takes a large space in each individual life and this field can range through several areas of knowledge and human needs.

Addressing cultural diversity as a possibility to expand the actions and the understanding of the world can help untangle webs which, in education, are fossilized. It is required to shed light and start new quests for the cultural diversity that exists among peoples, in a way that can show horizons that are still uncovered.

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