

## Open wounds of racism in the school environment

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10.56238/rcsv14n4-016

### ABSTRACT

The reflections presented in this article deal with the racism that permeates the school environment, as a result of the result of a survey carried out with 54 students in the 7th grade of Elementary School II in a public school in Salvador, Bahia, in 2023. Thus, a qualitative-quantitative approach was used using the semi-structured questionnaire technique, in order to obtain the largest possible number of answers, however, with emphasis on their quality and considering the subjectivities inherent to the theme. In addition, activities such as conversation circles, music and drawings were carried out, with the objective of capturing the students' perception in greater depth. It is noteworthy that the school was pointed out by most students as being the place where they heard about or learned about racism and that in this same environment racialized students suffer racist violence. To build reflections on the theme, the text is based on authors such as ALMEIDA (2021), OLIVEIRA (2007), GOMES (2006), MBEMBE (2019), SILVA (2010).

**Keywords:** Racism, School Environment, Students, Violence.

### INTRODUCTION

The present study, the result of a research carried out with students from public elementary schools in Salvador, Bahia, presents a reflection on racism within the school environment. Since racialization, as a social marker, also affects the school environment, it represents one of the problems existing in the school, although it contradicts its function, *a priori*, inclusive, by replicating numerous prejudices and discriminations through its school body, for this study, particularly between male and female students, in their daily interactions.

Being a structuring element of the Brazilian reality, racism has a great impact on school dynamics. In school, one of the main forms of perpetuation of racism is the denial of its existence based on a negligent view that the school would be somehow immune to the contradictions present in social reality. Thus, it is as if when we enter the gates of the school we are in a parallel universe in which the reality of the country does not apply. In fact, this does not happen, because the school does not distance itself from the current reality, as well as its interlocutors are also inserted in the Brazilian social dynamics.

Through pedagogical practice, I noticed in the daily experiences in the classroom, constant offensive nicknames, physical aggression and threats. Thus, during this research, I sought to portray

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the perception that students have on the subject, how racism is updated at school and how often it occurs.

The school is a space that has the function, in addition to favoring the construction of knowledge of its students, to create learning situations that favor development in the individual and collective spheres, for the exercise of full citizenship. According to Freire (1997, p. 22), "teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating the possibilities for its production or construction".

Furthermore, the practice of good coexistence and respect in the school environment is of paramount importance for the formation of citizens within a society in which equal rights are aspired to. According to Chalita (2008, p.201), "the school is a place that brings together many people. Different looks, tastes, whims, talents, feelings, dreams, needs, life stories, contexts".

The choice was made for the quali-quantitative research, since, if, on the one hand, qualitative research is the one that best suits social themes in education, as is the case, on the other hand, quantitative research is important when it is intended to evaluate the occurrence of a certain phenomenon, Sampiéri (2006). It is worth noting that this study is based on the contributions of each method and not on its possible weaknesses.

The study was carried out with two 7th grade classes, aged between 12 and 14 years, totaling 54 participants in the proposed questionnaire, including male and female students.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIAL MARKER OF RACIALIZATION**

"Race is not a fixed, static term. Its meaning is inevitably linked to the historical circumstances in which it is used" (Almeida, 2021, p. 24) and, as a performative, it adds a peculiar historical link, a generative milestone that attributes meaning in the Brazilian context. Furthermore, it refers to a set of classificatory practices that typify bodies, origins, cultures, and phenotypes as a way of separating white and non-white people in order to maintain privileges of the first group.

Racism is the manifestation of the idea that one has about a race. It is understood that race is a mental category and a direct product of modernity constructed and consolidated to legitimize colonization through power relations, (Quijano, 2002).

In fact, it is important to understand that the *modus operandi* of racism hierarchizes corporeities on a scale of value and justifies unequal treatment, that is, we, black women, do not occupy the spaces of power and full citizenship. "Ultimately, racism serves as a way of cataloguing individuals, moving them away or closer to the sense of humanity according to their racial characteristics" (FLAUZINA, 2008, p. 16). Also from this perspective, it is added that:

Race is not a biological reality, but only a concept, in fact, scientifically inoperative to explain human diversity and to divide it into stagnant races. In other words, biologically and scientifically, races do not exist (Munanga, 2004, p. 19).

In its structure, racism is inserted in a historical process, as it has always been present in the formation of Brazilian society, sustaining economic processes and social organization through a terribly long period of enslavement and continues to this day; It is also a political process, as it influences the organization of society and the distribution of power in an unequal way.

In this way, the conception of structural racism seeks to understand the modes of organization of society, offering a more integrated analysis of the various elements involved in the phenomenon of racism (ALMEIDA, 2021).

Reflecting on Mbembe (2019), racism and race are markers defined by the State, and he will always use such definitions to maintain the normalization of crimes designed by him. This type of racism deepens in our subjectivities, to the extent that we naturalize it and believe "that it has always been this way" and "that nothing can be done about it". It also penetrates deeply into our institutions and social structures, to the point of seeming like a "natural order of reality."

Thus, it is possible to perceive the materialization of the phenomenon of racism in the various spheres of society and its updating over time, in an effective and equally effective way in what is proposed. It is worth noting that:

What could be considered stories or memories of the colonial period remain alive in the social imaginary and acquire new clothes and functions in a supposedly democratic social order that keeps intact the gender relations, according to the color and race instituted in the slavery period. (CARNEIRO, 2003, p. 23).

In addition, racism always has a structural character, since it is an element that makes up the "economic and political organization of society, providing the meaning, logic, and technology for the reproduction of forms of inequality and violence that shape contemporary social life" (ALMEIDA, 2018, p. 21), producing poverty, unemployment, deprivation, and scarcity of all kinds.

In short, it is evident that the relationship between race and racism is linked to social, economic and cultural factors linked to a discriminatory and hierarchical ideology according to the literature that supports the theme, in fact it is worth mentioning the words of Horkheimer and Adorno (1986, p.158) who state:

Race is not immediately, as racists would have it, a particular natural characteristic. It is, rather, the reduction to the natural, to pure violence, the obstinate particularity that, in the existent, is precisely the universal. Race, today, is the self-affirmation of the bourgeois individual integrated into the barbarian collectivity.

## THE SCHOOL IN THE FACE OF RACISM

Historically, in Brazil, the school is constituted as a selective space, marked by the complexities of ethnic-racial relations, therefore, the entire community that makes up this collective suffers crossings and is somehow affected. However, the damage caused to black girls and adolescents makes them more vulnerable, since they are affected by racial, gender, and, as a rule, class discrimination, as they are part of the poorest layers in society.

The way in which the school is structured and organized is stratified and tends to reproduce and continue prejudices and exclusions that exist in society. Within this exclusionary structure, black children are commonly affected. According to Gomes (2003, p. 38):

The very structure of the Brazilian school, the way it is thought and carried out, excludes the black and poor student. This exclusion is characterized in different ways, through the way black students are treated; by the absence or superficial presence of the discussion of the racial issue within the school; for the non-existence of this discussion in teacher training courses and centers.

The understanding of the school as an educational space, which it proposes contributes to the development of a viable education project committed to the development of its students, and should aim to intervene in reality in order to make this environment a place for the construction of knowledge, democratic and free of prejudice.

Santos (2007, p. 27) states that the school:

“(...) can reproduce the forms of relations present in society, including racial ones”. Since the aspiration is to build a just and egalitarian society, it is of fundamental importance that children have an education free from discrimination and, therefore, free from prejudice, social exclusion, marginalization and violence. To this end, it is essential that there be “[...] a real commitment of all those who want to live in a fairer society, especially on the part of education professionals” (MARTINS & MUNHOZ, 2007, p. 35).

One of the great challenges of education today is to promote the inclusion of the various groups that make up Brazilian society and that live together in the school space. In general, daily life in the school space presents numerous demands, precisely because it is a heterogeneous space, in social, cultural and ethnic terms.

Thus, it should be noted that through training focused on inclusion, respect for diversity and citizenship, teachers, important actors in the educational dynamics, will have more tools and competence in mediating the issue of racism in the school environment, in order to intervene assertively and appropriately, contributing to the inhibition of any and all forms of racial prejudice that may occur. Santos (2007, p. 77) suggests that:

The training of educators for the treatment of ethnic and racial diversity, in the school context, is of paramount importance for a daily and safe professional practice for the

inclusion of racial diversity. However, the lack of access to information and specific training for their educational practice in relation to the theme does not exempt them from responsibility and sensitivity with the treatment of diversity and protection of students in situations of discrimination.

Bringing up Morin's understanding (2001, p. 11), "an education can only be viable if it is an integral education of the human being. An education that is addressed to the open totality of the human being and not just to one of its components", being built in a democratic, inclusive and pluricultural way in favor of citizenship.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION**

It is of paramount importance to consider the need for investigative procedures to be based on viable and adequate ways for the production of knowledge, as well as linked to ethical principles of research, emphasizing that the commitment established in all stages of this study revolves around these assumptions.

In this study, it is understood that "the collection and analysis of data from the combination can strengthen the results of the research" (BRYMAN, 1995, p. 134). In accordance with this understanding, the development of the present study was based on elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, as it is understood that sometimes one form or another best fits, having as its object, the conceptions of social actors in the student environment regarding racism. "The only thing to gain is the qualitative evaluation that knows how to intelligently surround itself with an empirical basis, because quality is not the logical contradiction of quantity, but the opposite side of the same coin" (DEMO, 2002, p.35).

The quantitative approach presupposes objectivity on the part of the researcher, while the qualitative approach, used in a procedural way, according to Tesch (1990), "uses subjective information, which can be expressed in words or in other ways, such as paintings, photographs, drawings, films or music". "In the Mixed Method, as it is called by some authors, the researcher bases the investigation on the assumption that the collection of various types of data ensures a better understanding of the researched problem" (CRESWELL, 2007, p. 34-35).

In this way, activities were carried out in the classroom, which began with a debate that had "racism" as a generating theme, with expressive participation of the classes, each one in their specific class time, under my mediation, as a teacher of the classes, and culminated with a cycle of debates on the subject, with students of the aforementioned classes so that it was possible to complete the inference about their perception of racism. Such activities preceded the questionnaire, with 12 questions, applied to the students, interlocutors of this study.

## THE TECHNIQUES USED

### Classroom activities

Through interventions made with the classes, conversation circles were held about racism. From this generating theme, the concept and personal experiences among the students in groups were sought, in which they reported situations experienced or even watched in the news and digital media they access.

Dialogues and debates took place during class hours, for a period of two hours of class (2h/y), with the aforementioned teacher. From this new construction, using another 4 hours, the students, in groups of 4 to 6 components, demonstrated what they learned about the theme in a creative way, using previous knowledge, drawings, music or small dramatizations, according to the group's choice. The activities were presented to classmates and the teacher in the classroom.

### Semi-structured questionnaire

The research was carried out in two classes with students from the 7th grade of a public school in the city of Salvador, totaling 54 interlocutors. For data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire was carried out, constructed by the researcher and submitted to a pre-test with 8 students from<sup>the</sup> same school, but from different classrooms.

It is worth mentioning that in some questions, the students signaled more than one alternative, or even did not want to answer some of them for reasons that go beyond the limits or contours of this research.

## RESULTS

### SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE STUDENT INTERLOCUTORS OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out with students enrolled in 2023, in the 7th grade of Elementary School in a public school in Salvador. Participants were 54 adolescents aged between 12 and 14 years, 57% female and 43% male. Of these, 81% identified themselves as black or brown; 12% as white and 7% did not answer this question.

### PERCEPTIONS OF RACISM

Regarding whether or not they have heard about racism, of the total number of students surveyed, 96% have heard about this topic and 4% said they have never heard of it. Among those who have heard about this subject, the school appears as the main place of dissemination of this social marker, being signaled in 55% of the questionnaires, digital media with 30% of the questionnaires, the family in 11% and TV appears in 4% of the answers.

When asked if they ever wanted to leave or change schools because they suffered racist violence, such as embarrassment, physical or verbal aggression by other students, 43% said yes.

Regarding who is responsible or to blame for the existence of racist practices and behaviors in the school environment, the most cited were the aggressors themselves, 54%; parents or guardians of aggressors, 32%, and management/coordination/teachers, 14%.

## OCCURRENCE, FORMS AND SENSATIONS OF RACIST PRACTICES AT SCHOOL

When asked how often they had suffered some type of racist violence at school, by the same person or by the same group of people, it was found that 51% answered that they were victimized and victimized from one to several times, 18% report suffering from this phenomenon almost every day and 7%, Every day, 19% said they had never suffered racism and 5% did not answer this question.

As for the most mentioned forms of racism, 57% pejorative terms such as macaca, macaco, cabelo duro, macumbeira or macumbeiro, 22% physical aggression, 17% never suffered and 4% did not respond.

Regarding whether they have ever witnessed any student who suffered what they consider to be racism within the school environment, the majority, 51%, answered yes, 32% answered no, 14% said they did not know and 3% did not answer this question.

Among the students who admitted to having suffered racial violence, 49% say that the fact occurred on the court, courtyard or corridors of the school; 28% say it was in the classroom and 23% point to other places, such as the street or social networks.

When asked about the feelings of these students, who declared that they suffered or had suffered racist aggression, 46% felt sadness, 30% anger, 12% inferiority in relation to the aggressors, 9% did not know, 3% did not answer.

When asked if they had ever committed any form of racial violence against their classmates inside or outside the school, most answered no, accounting for 84% of the results, 7% answered yes, 6% answered no knowledge and inferiority in relation to the aggressors inferiority in relation to the aggressors 3% did not answer this question.

## DISCUSSION

### STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

The fact that most of the interlocutors in the research answered that they have an understanding of what racism is is confirmed by the interactions in classroom activities, dialogues

and conversation circles, as well as by the material produced by them during the process, such as short dramatizations and songs and drawings.

Thus, some of the students' statements about what racism is were: "prejudice", "lack of respect", "calling a monkey", "offending people, putting defects because of color", "calling them macumbeira", "verbally assaulting people", "it's discriminating, cursing, humiliating people, just because of appearance", "it's when people call other people with names they don't like or because of their color", "thinking he's better than others", "it's a way of humiliating others for their flaws", "it's a way of making a person sad with horrible nicknames", "unfunny jokes", "it's when people abuse the other verbally and physically", "cursing and humiliating, making the person feel ugly", "mocking the colleague", "nickname about the race that offends people".

Regarding the fact that most actors affirm that it is at school that they hear about or learn about racism, it is in accordance with what Palma et al. (2010, p.20) states: "when teaching, the teacher develops a set of operations that transform the curriculum into real practice". In fact, "the teacher must have information, training, discernment and sensitivity about the situation of the racial and social reality in the country to contribute to overcoming prejudice and discrimination" (BRASIL. MEC, 1997, p. 4).

According to the results of the questionnaires, it is clear that most students relate the motivations for racist practice, mainly to physical and aesthetic characteristics. In this regard, Oliveira (2007) states that in many cases the image or idea that has been constructed about black students is an image of the black person as a being who is worth less, who has fewer rights, who is less than the one who is not. Reflecting with Santos (2001, p. 33), it is found that black students are:

Aesthetically he is invisible, because the standard of beauty that has developed here excludes him and is often seen as someone ethically not very acceptable. It is a heavy tripod, which is based on the denial of its qualities: (a) it is intellectually fragile; (b) is aesthetically inferior; and (c) of dubious character.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR RACIST VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Regarding the blame or responsibility for the existence of racism in the school environment, most of the interviewees affirm that it is the aggressors, parents or guardians. Corroborating this finding, it is noted that:

It seems that the discriminatory attitudes of the students are effects of the racist view of blacks, relayed within the family, which are updated by the students at school. The school, in turn, collaborates with the maintenance and continuity of racism, given its silence on racial issues and situations of discrimination that mark relationships in the school context. In this sense, it is at school



that students exercise racist feelings, re-elaborate racism and reaffirm the feeling of superiority due to the fact that they are white (SANTOS, 2007, p. 41).

It is noted that a significant portion of students declared that it is also the responsibility of managers, coordinators and teachers, in accordance with the booklet of the National Council of Justice, according to which the practice of racism is also the responsibility of parents and guardians and school managers, and that they, as representatives of the institution's authority, they must call the Guardianship Councils and the Child and Adolescent Protection Agencies (ECA) and if legal measures are not taken, they must answer for the acts of omission.

The fact that more than half of the students who admit to having suffered racism at school places the court, the courtyard, corridors or the classroom as places of greater occurrence of the phenomenon. This fact shows the fragility that the school still has in dealing with the issue. It is worth noting that it is visible that many schools, in general, are still not prepared to deal with racism "the action of schools on the subject is still in an embryonic stage", is what Silva (2010, p. 162) states.

The school environment, as it is a section of society, portrays the demands and issues that are linked to it, in this way, "the school community tends to reproduce, to a greater or lesser extent, society as a whole" (Silva, 2010, p. 79). In fact, the very structure of the Brazilian school, the way it is thought and carried out, excludes the black and poor student. This exclusion is characterized in different ways, through the way black students are treated (...) (GOMES, 2003, p. 38).

According to Fante (2005), everyone, including teachers, should be responsible for what happens among children and adolescents in the school environment, it is a commitment of all actors within this context, to control or minimize acts of violence among students on school premises.

It was also possible to observe the feeling of sadness, anger and internalization on the part of students who claimed to suffer racist violence at school.

It is worth highlighting two statements, obtained during the dialogues in the classroom as well as during the production of group activities. Student "A", self-declared black: "To this day I hate the boys they called monkey and dirty, it was last year, I studied at another school, but I always remember, when I pass in front of that school sometimes I feel like crying. I felt like garbage, but here no one did racism, but I realize that many don't even talk to me properly or want me in the groups, that's racism too, but there it was worse." Student "B", self-declared black: "I don't like school very much because of that too, any fight, anything they just curse us as monkeys or macumbeiras, if they think it's better, I get depressed, wanting to go somewhere else, because even when the teacher complains, then they curse again, it's no use." **Guimarães (2008)** argues that racism

fosters traumatizing conflict situations, generated by the continuous experience in a harmful environment.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the school is an environment in which students have the assumption of being socialized, and in the midst of diversity build a citizenship formation, in many cases, in the name of this same diversity, they suffer hostility and violence such as racism.

Furthermore, the complexity that involves the school environment as well as the heterogeneous profile of its actors requires constant thinking and rethinking, building and deconstructing, so that true respect for plurality is achieved and opportunities and rights are guaranteed without exceptions. The prejudiced practice of race, or of any nature, offends human dignity and prevents the exercise of democracy.

The school environment is also one of the main accesses for overcoming racist, discriminatory, hostile and violent behaviors, as it is a place for building relationships based on respect and the formation of people able to live in society in a democratic and citizen way. "The strategic importance of schools, education and also youth in the fight against racism and in the defense of human rights is recognized" Castro and Abramovay (2006, p. 21).

It is up to the school community as a whole to take responsibility for the physical and emotional integrity of its students and, through pedagogical interventions, to provide them with a favorable learning environment and guarantee them the right to inclusive and citizen education. Activities that foster the debate on the issue have an important impact on the population that suffers from racism and discrimination, if based on their guidance and acceptance.

In short, through joint efforts, generated by pedagogical practices that promote respect and equality among its actors, it is possible to build new ways of experiencing the school environment and consequently of relating to diversity, in the formation of future citizens aware of the otherness present in every society.

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