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### **Ethnic and Race Relations: Changes in the Brazilian's Educational Policy**

In 2005 I was working for the Brazilian's Ministry of Education and part of my job was to travel to different states to provide support for educational departments. On one of my trips, I met a woman who had a five-year-old son. When she realized that I was working for the Ministry of Education, she told me her dilemma: "I love my son, who is an adopted black child, but several times when he arrived at home, he told me that he wants to change the color of his skin. I want to be white, mom." She told and almost began to cry. After that she asked me a hard question: "What can I do? He does not accept his skin color, and children in his school say offensive words and show some kind of prejudice against him too". Then, she wanted to know whether I would recommend some pedagogical material that could help her in that process? Consequently, he has low esteem; also, he thinks that he is not a beautiful child and desires to belong to another ethnic group.

Race relationship is a serious matter, which has varying effects on curricular policy in Brazil. Although there are people who do not believe that the inclusion of African History and Culture in the curriculum must be mandatory, some legal measures to include this subject are fundamental and can encourage the educational system to improve its performance.

To give some context to the problem, Brazil has a Afro-Brazilian<sup>1</sup> population of 45% and has been characterized as a harmonious "racial democracy". In fact, this conception is not true because Afro-Brazilian people have been discriminated against for over 500 years due the experiences of colonization and slavery. Even today, most Brazilian's educational experience is marked by historical racism; as a result there is an absence of positive references about the civilizing knowledge and values of the African Brazilian and African cultures. Nowadays, the substandard position and condition of this population facing the educational system is still aberrant.

For instance, some data have demonstrated the vast gap between white and Afro-Brazilian people. Buckley (2000) shows:

A wide gap between blacks [4,2%] and whites [6,2%] persists in education years of schooling completed (...) nationwide statistics show that only 2 percent of black students ever make it to the university level, compared with 10 percent of whites. More than 50 percent of Brazil's blacks are illiterate, compared with 20 percent of the overall population.

Furthermore, in light of this, only after five centuries of existence and a hundred and nineteen of slavery, Brazil made a great advance by making federal law No. 10639 in 2003 that altered Brazilian's Basic Education National Law, which makes the teaching of African-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory throughout the official teaching curriculum. For instance, in order to normalize and offer orientations for the educational system, the National Council on Education (CNE) regulated some legislative changes through the Curricular Guidelines for Ethnic and Race Relations Education and for Teaching African-Brazilian and African History and Culture.

The first argument of those who opposed these measures is that in Brazil there is not a racial problem, but only social class problems. Nevertheless, this argument is not valid because “this crucial variable [race] is largely ignored by experts on this topic. Brazil is considered to an (...) egalitarian society, and the great villains of history in regard to differential access to education are socioeconomic status and class inequalities”, according to Hasenbalg and Valle (1999, p. 5), renown researchers on this issue. Even though it is possible to realize gradually changes in the racial and social awareness in Brazil, the idea that the problem is only socioeconomic has become accepted by academia and common sense belief. On the other hand, it is impossible to deny the racial element due to the tremendous gap between white and Afro-Brazilian people. But supporters provide convincing evidence “white Brazilians earn more, live longer, receive more education (...) than black citizens” (Rohter, 2003, p.2).

Another argument against the mandatory inclusion of African-based curricula is that Brazil is a “racial paradise,” which alludes to the “myth of racial democracy” because it is a multicultural society which does “not segregate” but “integrates” white, yellow, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian people. On the contrary, the ideology of racial democracy remained still a delicate issue which has been built on the despotic intention of refuting not only

racial disparity but also impeding racial mobilization (Winant, 1999, p.100). Consequently, this situation must be changed in order to make improvements and provide benefits to Afro-Brazilians.

Even though some Brazilian intellectual and educators have criticized the educational measures described previously, this legislation has undergone significant racial, social, political and cultural changes. Therefore, the law and the curricular guidelines are a very important document because they give many orientations not only for the teachers but also for the elementary and high schools and other educational establishments such as private and public Universities and non-profit organizations. Also, they provide a response to the principal demand for which Afro-Brazilians have been fighting; for example, the right to equal education, which is an important step to achieving all-embracing “social, economic, and political inclusion” (Mikevis and & Flynn, 2005, p. 7). To illustrate some educational advances, Brazil’s Ministry of Education has organized and published many educational materials such as books entitled “*Coleção Educação para Todos*” (The Series -Education for All) and a series for educational programs on TV, course on distance learning, seminars, forums, conferences in order to offer support to educational system and teaching training.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the role that the Brazilian black movement has played since its existence. Several NGO, working with Afro-Brazilian communities, have been pressuring and demanding the government for decades. Thus, the “Afro-Brazilian movement continues to struggle against many other impediments” in order to enjoy the benefits that the population deserves (Mikevis and & Flynn, 2005, p. 6).

In sum, given the whims of the educational policies of the different governments, what we can highlight in this legislation is that the right to education has gained greater expression in terms of official proposals. Despite advances in the legislative process and the organization of educators as well as NGO’s in defense of putting these rights into effect overall, there is still a lot left to do so as to represent satisfactorily the thinking and culture of Afro-Brazilians in education . In this sense, “we have to turn our attention to Africa, considering its unquestionable relevance as a stage to human actions and because of the deep relations we have with that continent through the Atlantic” (Oliva, 2003, p.421). But rescuing the past goes beyond to just changing curricula in school but must include major reforms in the educational system that continues benefit white Brazilians at the expense of Afro-Brazilians. In fact, this issue is challenging and this process brings gradual changes; yet the work, which the

Ministry, NGO's and so on have been done, have encouraged the educational system in doing and thinking about its performance.

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<sup>i</sup> In this essay, racial classification will follow the categories employed from the Brazilian's official census, which makes use of black (preto is considered dark skin), brown (pardo is considered a mixture between black and white or another racial group) and white (branco). Also, the terminology Afro-Brazilian and black people will be adopted in this essay to refer to black and brown people because in Brazil these groups belong to almost the same environment or pattern of exclusion.