

Introduction

Dossier

ANTHROPOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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Researching the universe of education in contemporary Brazil is a great challenge. Over many decades, anthropology has let go of one of its central themes, the socialization of children and youth. As Howard Becker (1961) once said, anthropologists, in the end, were not good advisers. Becker is referring to his research with students of a Medical School. Indeed, our discipline describes how things are and not how they should be. We are thus not proposing a dossier about schools, but one which studies varied questions and social situations through thick descriptions “in” schools and “in” other institutions of education, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz when he says that anthropologists “don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods...); they study *in* villages” (Geertz 1973: 22).

The articles in this dossier, then, describe and analyse social situations within educational institutions; taken as a set, they offer a fairly complete panorama of the enormous difficulties and the complexity of the task of describing and understanding formal education in Brazil.

The themes are dealt with in three sections. The first is composed of five studies that describe and analyse social policies that substantially impacted

the educational system. It begins with a classic ethnography in a city in the hinterlands of the Brazilian Northeast, focusing on the repercussions, for the educational upbringing of children and adolescents, of a public policy aimed at combatting hunger (“Programa Fome Zero”). Next, we have research on a programme that distributes free textbooks to all Brazilian public schools and all students in basic education. It investigates images of the country and ideas of “Brazilianess” conveyed by these books in two moments of our recent history. The following article is also an ethnography of two schools for children. It describes the socially constructed forms of the children’s racial classification and ways of dealing with racism and discrimination. This first set of articles also contains a study of affirmative action in a public university in the south of the country, an article on the implementation of a programme aimed at widening access to higher education in private institutions, and, finally, a study of teacher training in the context of a new federal policy concerning Indigenous education.

The second section focuses on school ethos through the description and analysis of specific social situations. The four studies describe the social structure and organization of public schools in the Southeast and Northeast regions of Brazil.

In the last section, we present an essay on the first post-graduate programme in anthropology and education: a narrative of one of its founders, almost an auto-ethnography.

In the *Déjà lu* section, which typically reprints hard-to-come-by classics, we have decided to include two unpublished texts. The first concerns Indigenous schools after the changes effected by the Federal Government during the 1990’s. It is the document that subsidized the elaboration of the National Education Plan (*Plano Nacional de Educação*) in 1994. The second was written by one of the authors of the classic studies on race relations in Brazil. This article, based on the author’s personal experiences, contains an ethnographic description of race relations in one of the most prestigious universities in the country, the University of São Paulo (USP), during the 1980’s. The period analysed is hence prior to the struggles of the social movements for the adoption of affirmative action in higher education based on social and racial criteria at the start of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, other equally important themes are absent from this dossier. These include, for instance, the matter of compulsory religious

teaching in public schools; education in the “*comunidades quilombolas*”, legally defined by current legislation as descendants of former maroons. We were also unable to include research that investigates the impact of a federal law from 2003 that established the teaching of African history and Afro-Brazilian culture in public and private schools through Brazil; or to deal with the question of violence in and around Brazilian schools.

So that the reader may understand some of the issues addressed in this dossier, certain aspects of formal education in Brazil need to be elucidated.

The education system in Brazil, is formed by basic education – composed of infant, primary (*fundamental*) and secondary (*médio*: middle) education – youth and adult education, technical instruction and higher education. Infant education is not compulsory and is offered to children between three and five years old. Primary education is compulsory, comprising nine years of schooling for children between 6 and 14 years and is provided by municipalities and/or states. Secondary education, comprising three years of instruction, is not compulsory and is offered to young people between 15 and 17 years old, and is provided by the states. Youth and adult education is for young people over the age of 18 and is provided by the states too. Technical instruction, aimed at the work market, is for young people, non-compulsory and can be undertaken concomitantly with secondary education. Higher education is divided into teaching diplomas (*licenciatura*), bachelor degrees (*bacharelado*), postgraduate degrees and technological training.²

This educational system is also characterized by a duality between public and private institutions that traverses the period from pre-school to higher education. In pre-school, primary and secondary education, public schools are, in general, of low quality and account for around 75% of all enrolments; private institutions, which are fewer in number and considered to be better quality, basically cater for an elite benefitted by educational, and, consequently, social privilege. This correlation is inverted in higher education. Public institutions are, in general, organized like universities. They are free and deemed to be of better quality, both in what pertains to

1 “Maroon communities” are rural communities thus defined by the 1988 constitution. Their classification relies on a process that recognizes their claim to a historical origin in slavery. If this origin is recognized, the community is then granted a territory demarcated with the help of anthropologists, who authenticated their common belonging to an original culture. On this issue, see Vêran (2003).

2 www.brasil.gov.br/educacao/2014/05/saiba-como-e-a-divisao-do-sistema-de-educacao-brasileiro.

teaching and research. But they account for only 25% of enrolments in higher education. Most students, therefore, in higher education are enrolled in private institutions, which are not only of lower quality, but where they also have to pay fees – or, more recently, rely on federal scholarships or student funding. The world of private institutions of higher education has been studied by Sampaio (2015).

Alongside the public/private duality, the Brazilian system of higher education has other segmentations and its institutions also reveal an internal hierarchy. Human science degree courses, and those that train teachers, generally have less prestige, and hence tend to gather more students from lower income families and with worse academic records.

The organizational model

In some educational systems, such as, for instance, that of the United Kingdom, teaching is organized through *tracks* and choices. Students enter the system and follow their school career on the principle that to each grade there corresponds an age. There are opportunities to choose disciplines and paths. During the course, students are tested, and they can select those disciplines in which they obtain better results. At the conclusion of the school career, those who obtained better grades in specific exams in the disciplines they selected will move on to higher education or, perhaps, complement their education with formal training in polytechnic schools.

Unlike the British system, the Portuguese and French systems are based on an assimilationist principle. The basic premise is that all students learn together a number of canonical disciplines. Those who do not obtain the necessary passing grades in all subjects, repeat the year. Being held back a year is an old practice in France and it is a part of the history of their educational system, even if, from the 1980's, the practice has been subjected to a number of scathing critiques, which have resulted in greater control over it.

Although the Brazilian educational system is strongly influenced by the French model, we raise the hypothesis that education in this country also works through an organizational principle that is typical of the assimilationism, inherited from the Portuguese, and that has colonized Brazil for centuries.

Portuguese assimilationalism was based on the idea that indigenous, or colonized, people, could seek out Portuguese citizenship if they submitted

themselves to the arduous task of abandoning their language, their culture, “their mores and customs”. In practice, at the end of the process, after difficult exams, very few native people were considered assimilated enough to obtain Portuguese citizenship.³

As a counterpoint, it can be said that the British colonial enterprise always accounted for differences and that this produced a divided society in which the education of those under colonial administration was carried out under other terms. In British colonial schools, English and other subjects were taught, but so were local languages. Education was effectively bilingual.⁴

The ideas of Portuguese assimilationism can give us some clues towards an understanding of why Brazil, with an educational system that is so expensive and so complex, sees so few students graduate in its various educational tiers, and why school performance continues to be so poor.

In the Brazilian model, children and adolescents who do not obtain the necessary results are removed from their grade; accumulating repetitions, many give up and abandon school before they obtain a diploma. To deal with this difficulty, some policies have been implemented and have shown results. In 1980 grade repetition in what was then the first year of study, when students were around seven years old, was at about 60%, as Costa Ribeiro (1991) shows in his classic *A Pedagogia da Repetência* (The ‘Pedagogy of grade repetition’)⁵ and Klein (2006).

In the 1980’s a very small proportion of children between the ages of 7 and 14 were enrolled in the educational system. Consequently, in secondary education the enrolment of students from 15 to 17 years of age was much lower.

Currently, 98% of children between 7 and 14 are enrolled in primary education (*ensino fundamental*). According to data obtained by the Pesquisa Nacional de Amostra Domiciliar (PNAD) in 2013, those between 15 and 17 are distributed in diverse stages of the education system: 54.3% of them are in high school, 19.6% are still in primary education, and there are those who no longer study⁶.

3 The paradoxes of Portuguese assimilationism were studied by Macagno (1996), who considered the dilemmas faced by the indigenous people of Mozambique in their relations with their colonizers.

4 An analysis of the complexities of these two colonial paradigms can be found in Fry (2000).

5 We have decided to leave Costa Ribeiro’s expression in Portuguese throughout the text, since it loses some of its scope in a simple translation into English.

6 On the development of these indicators in the last 30 years, see Andrade and Dachs (2007) and the Observatório do Plano Nacional de Educação website (<http://www.observatoriodopne.org.br/>).

Much has changed in almost 35 years. According to Ruben Klein (personal communication), the rate of grade repetition in Brazil in the first years of education has fallen in 2013 to 4,1% in the first year; 5,1% in the second year; 12,5% in the third year; 8,6% in the fourth year; 8,3% in the fifth year; 14,5% in the sixth year; 11,9% in the seventh year; 8,3% in the eighth year; 8,8% in the ninth year; 18,5% in the first year of high school; 10,2% in the second year of high school and 6,6% in the last year of high school⁷.

There has been a growing group of people aiming to break with this “pedagogical methodology” and to render school careers less riddled with obstacles, so that students can exercise choice and follow different “tracks”. But there is also much resistance to this view, as we will see in the descriptions of researchers who have studied the school ethos in this dossier.

Since the start of this century, a set of policies geared towards widening access have been implemented. Concurrently, the fight against the culture of grade repetition has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of graduates from secondary education, which is a necessary step for access to higher education. As a further result of these measures, enrolment in higher education has more than tripled in the last decade, being currently at 7.8 million students, even though this number falls short of the aim of enrolling 30% of people between the ages of 18 and 24. Various factors contribute to this. The first concerns the “pedagogia da repetência” and drop-out rates in basic education, which remain high and ensure that less than half of students complete secondary education. A further factor is that enrolment in higher education included many older students who have benefitted from programmes and scholarships.

Despite efforts towards widening access and ensuring that children stay in school, there has not been a corresponding rise in student proficiency in large-scale proficiency exams, including international evaluations. Furthermore, the persistence of grade repetition guarantees that a significant number of young people are out of school and have no certificate of having completed any course.

7 Since the law 11.114/2005 was passed, enrolment in basic education became compulsory for six-year olds. The statistician Ruben Klein has analysed the basic education system and, in a communication at the seminar of the Associação Brasileira de Avaliação Educacional (Abave; ‘Brazilian Association of Educational Evaluation’) in November of 2015, presented this data from an analysis of the Educational Census carried out by the Ministry for Education in 2013.

Nonetheless, even considering all of the significant changes in the last twenty years, Sergio Costa Ribeiro's assessment from 1991 is still valid. He defined our educational system as being orchestrated by a "*pedagogia da repetência*":

It seems that the practice of failing students is contained in the pedagogy of the system as a whole. It is as if it were an integral part of pedagogy, *naturally* accepted by all agents in the process. The persistence of this practice and the rates of repetition leads us to consider a true pedagogical methodology that inheres in the system, despite all of the efforts at universalizing basic education in Brazil. (Costa Ribeiro, 1991: 18)

In effect, the description of the principle that organizes Brazilian educational system through an analogy with assimilationism characteristic of Portuguese colonial agency can help us to understand the persistence of the "*pedagogia da repetência*" which, for different reasons and with different effects, continues to permeate the educational system of Brazil.

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