

The Quilombola School and the Confrontation of Prejudice: A Management
Experience in a Riverine-Quilombola Community

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Abstract

The discussions developed in this paper evolved around the management experience of a *quilombola* school located in a remnant community in the municipality of Abaetetuba, in the state of Pará. Owing to its location in an island, it serves the *quilombola* and riverine residents (non remnants). Some events of prejudice involving students' parents and students were experienced and reported by the school director, who took steps to overcome the situation through dialoguing. This paper was based on a qualitative research developed by means of observation, interviews and document analysis. The main reflections presented refer to the fact that the management of a *quilombola* school involves sensitivity to perceive the problems of the community and attitude to bring them into the school context in order to be debated and challenged.

Keywords: Quilombola education; prejudice; educational management.

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Introduction

To think and produce education in a quilombola community it is necessary to listen, feel and understand the claims that emerge from the context – and that can touch our conscience elicited by our senses of vision and hearing – in terms of educational needs from children, youngsters, elderly people and leaders. This way, we also need to understand the quilombola education with focus on identity and diversity.

The focus on *identity* is justified by one dimension that is shared by all quilombolas and comprises the relationship with the land, territoriality and their condition of citizens of rights. This shared dimension of identity converges towards the idea of ethnic identity by Gaspar:

(...) Ethnic identity is a process of self-identification not limited to material or biological traces, such as the skin color, for example. They are communities, which have developed resistance mechanisms to preserve and reproduce their peculiar way of life, in a certain location (GASPAR, 2011, p. 45).

Quilombolas are, therefore, defined as social groups whose ethnic identity – common ancestry, specific social and political organization, linguistic, religious and cultural elements – distinguish them from the other social groups. These factors foster our broader comprehension of diversity as different cultures coexist all through Brazilian territory and every community is singular in its identity and dynamics. The ethnic-racial relationships and the cultural diversity in our country impose to the Brazilian nation, the duty to build policies and practices that effectively assure the constitutional principles that imply: promotion of general social wellbeing with no form of discrimination – race, gender, age or ethnic origin. Both State and school are expected to ensure, to all citizens, the right and respect to their cultural traditions, diversity and identity. These are in fact, constitutive parts of our political, historical, social and cultural development process.

This paper is part of my master dissertation and ensues from documental analysis, bibliographical research and interviews with the manager of a quilombola school in the Municipality of Abaetetuba, in the state of Pará. The main focus of the paper is to present the events of racial prejudice experienced by the school manager and the steps taken to deal with and face them. Dialoguing and education proved to sensitize parents and students in the confrontation of this issue.

About Education in the community and at school

Before I go deeper into describing Santo André School, it is opportune to present a brief historical background about the schools and the education in the community. This retrospection allows us to perceive the importance of both aspects to the residents as well as how they achieved the right to them.

According to Nunes; Santos; Pimentel (2011), the teaching in quilombolas remnant communities dates from 1963 in Abaetetuba, where there were initially improvised classrooms inside the houses, using precarious teaching materials and lay teachers. These arrangements, however, were extremely important for the process of literacy and schooling of children and youngsters of the region.

In the seventies, supported by the municipal administration of Abaetetuba, the national program MOBREAL¹ was implemented in the community. In the beginning of

¹ MOBREAL: Brazilian Alphabetization Movement

the eighties, the first school was inaugurated, still under precarious conditions, with multilevel groups and without the school meal system or didactic resources.

For some years, the situation remained unchanged and only primary school² education was offered – from 1st through 4th grades. For many students, reaching the 4th grade meant the very end of their educational trajectory. Those who could afford continuing their studies had to move to other cities. To tackle these difficulties, the community took steps to implement the expansion of primary school – from 5th through 8th grades, and secondary school. This was the birth of the SOME³ Project in the community, sponsored by the government of the state of Pará, which offered classes from the fifth through the eight grades. In the following year, the secondary school was implemented in its regular format, but still operating in a school far way from the community and under limited conditions.

Santo André School, a public school from the Municipality of Abaetetuba, serves seven communities in the region, offering both early childhood education, and classes from the 1st to the 5th grades. Classes ranging from the 6th to 9th grades as well as secondary level education are offered in partnership with Bem Vinda School located in the urban center of Abaetetuba. This partnership is twofold and results in positive and negative aspects for the community. On one hand, the offer of education opportunities in the community is very beneficial as it allows students to remain and finish their basic education in own place. On the other hand, the partnership restricts the reception of funds by Santo André School. This is due to the fact that students enrolled for the partnership program are registered as Bem Vinda's students. This represents a significant financial loss, but according to the manager, it was a necessary articulation for the benefit of education of children and teenagers of the community.

Currently, there is a process going on with the purpose of settling this situation and turning the school into an autonomous unit, that is, a quilombola school, in fact. In addition to the financial implications, there are also the pedagogical ones concerning the course curriculum of those grades offered in partnership. Urban schools offer a course curriculum and a board of teachers that are coherent to a distinct reality, thus preventing a comprehensive and desired work aligned with the purposes and principles of a quilombola school.

This situation, in fact, evolves in opposite direction to that of the educational pre-established quilombola principles as predicted in the following articles of the CNE-CEB/2012:

IV – preferential presence of quilombola teachers and managers in quilombola schools and in schools which receive student coming from quilombola territories; VI – ensuring of quilombola students' empowerment in political-pedagogical processes at all stages and modalities; VII – implementation of an open, flexible and interdisciplinary course curriculum, elaborated with a focus on the articulation of the knowledge transmitted at school and the knowledge s naturally constructed within the quilombola communities.

In addition, the educational unit is recognized as a quilombola school, but it does not have a coherent and specific curriculum, teachers or school meal that correspond to

² Primary school in Brazil “*Ensino Fundamental*” is divided into two segments. I – ranging from 1st to 4th grades and; II – ranging from 5th to 8th grades (ate the time). In 2006, it was expanded to 9 levels.

³ SOME: Modular system of organization of educational sponsored by the state government.

the quilombola reality and needs. These are legitimate demands, which have been granted by law, but are still unfulfilled.

It is possible to evidence a great effort on behalf of the school towards a sensibilization work with the students – from very elementary levels through the 6th grade – about the quilombola reality. This process of sensibilization and identity awareness involves bringing back folk stories, historical facts reported by the old residents of the community, traditions and festivities, with special emphasis to dialoguing with riverine students who are not quilombolas. It is intended to be a school for all, which does not exclude, but has the main purpose of preserving their identity.

The issue of racial prejudice at Santo André Quilombola School.

Another aspect which has called our attention were the narratives collected among the quilombola students expressing events of prejudice coming from riverine students. Some parents of non-quilombola students were reticent in enrolling their children. The manager describes some situations as follows:

It is one same space shared by all, so, in the beginning, some parents did not want to bring their children because they thought they would suffer those common punishments of the old times.

When we talk about quilombo, you know what that means; you know the story of quilombos who were slaves. If they committed a crime, there was a tree trunk, put him there, tie him there and so on. They thought these things would happen here. Lately, some people were coming here and as they entered, they kept looking around, and we became suspicious. What is this person looking for? Maybe he is trying to find a tree trunk here, if there is something to tie the students to. This is past. History that is gone.

Besides this situation of prejudice, lack and distorted information the, manager reported situations when remnants from quilombolas denied their own culture. For example, to enroll students it is necessary to provide a self-declaration stating that the student *is* or *is not* a quilombola. This is done in a specific form where parents have to tick the appropriate option in a box and some of the quilombolas filled the options ‘white’, ‘mulatto’ or ‘non quilombola’. These parents have not been asked why they did so, but the school secretary and manager infer that they might have been moved by the fear of being discriminated for their natural and ethnic conditions.

There were parents who were ashamed of letting their children know about their origin, or that they had suffered; many are ashamed to say what they have experienced in life. I think this fear of letting the children know about these facts is because, even today when we talk, many parents transmit this idea to the kids, so at that time they did not want to say they suffered, they grieved, they ran away from one place to the other not to be captured, some people still transmit this idea, but it has changed a lot in fact, we see there are people that are ashamed, then after it has been recognized now we are trying to rescue...

In classroom, there were moments when teachers spoke specifically about the slavery and the first quilombos. Then, the condition of remnant quilombola was denied by some students who preferred to self declare as non quilombolas and avoided taking part of the class. Some of these situations are reported as well as the attempt to solve them

Some of these situations and the attempts to solve them have been reported, as illustrated below:

First, we start by the student who comes from the early childhood education levels, so that he starts getting familiar with the idea and when we start with this work we also have to make an investigation to check where the student's father comes from, if it is from this side or the other, because there are fathers who guide, *if they say something you say you are not, it is too much trouble, you now*. This is the point where we still have a lot of difficulties you now. One day, we saw students discussing because they lived on different sides, and even the skin color was a bit different one from the other, then they discussed, we tried to reconcile, oh it cannot be like that, it is about the prejudice, really, racism, we say look, this should not exist here, the school is for all (...).

The reality which echoes in the voice of the manager and that ensues from his experiences shows us how prejudice has affected the remnant quilombolas to the point that they were capable to deny their own ancestry and their own history risking the continuity of their community history. That is, if stories are not told any longer to the teenagers and children, how can their identity be preserved? This is why Education and the school play a crucial role for the community, for it is in the school that the transformation process of reality starts.

For this reason, the quilombola school education should have the social, cultural, historical and economic values of the quilombola communities as references. To make it possible, the school needs to become an educational space that fosters: effective communication between community knowledge and school knowledge, culture preservation, fights for rights to the land and territory, work and sustainable development. The education promoted by the school must reflect the aspirations of the community, even if it accepts non- quilombola students. Education and respect are regarded as the essential means in confronting racism and prejudice.

As it was stated in the beginning of this paper, we must be sensitive enough in order to learn, see, listen and understand what is intrinsic to the community residents' aspirations and needs. Openly welcoming and understanding the remnant quilombolas and non-quilombolas together in the school may be the key actions to achieve this intent. By doing so, the school shows its receptiveness to diversity and gives its first step against prejudice. Furthermore, this attitude means facing the challenge of working with diversity, one that was accepted by the manager, who, in the face of the situations lived has proved once again that education, dialogue and affirmative actions are necessary for defying prejudice.

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