

Researching Teaching and Learning: Cultivating Equitable and Racially-Just Teaching in Brazilian Public Schools

ABSTRACT

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This special issue results from the cultivation and sustenance of a research network in Brazil, which at once attended to empirical research in Brazilian schools and focused on in-depth conceptualizations of equity and justice. The authors of the articles which comprise this special issue submitted funding proposals, and were selected by a team of experts to receive funding from the Lemann Foundation to carry out their research. In addition, two members of each team went to New York for a weeklong intensive on educational research centering equity and justice. Throughout the course of two years they worked in their teams and met as part of the larger research network, engaging in much-needed research, pursuing in-depth questions, and producing research that met international standards. This is illustrated, for example, by their participation in the premier educational research conference in the world in 2020 and then again in 2021, the American Educational Research Association conference. In my introduction to this special issue, I review the context of inequity and racial injustice in Brazilian public schools, offer a conceptualization of equity, and explore (not) belonging and its effects, before illustrating how each of the articles in this special issue urge us to engage in the pursuit of justice.

BRIEFLY REVIEWING THE CONTEXT

Often heralded as a “racial democracy” (ROTH-GORDON, 2016, p. 52), Brazil is marked by pervasive and ingrained racism. “Brazil has for centuries treated nonwhiteness as something to be feared and minimized” and its “policies of racial assimilation have encouraged miscegenation (or racial mixture)... so that Brazil could progressively ‘whiten’...future generations” (p. 52). Additionally, Brazil has (as recently as 1917-1945) sponsored what has been called “behavioral whitening...discarding African and indigenous cultural practices” (DÁVILA, 2003, p. 27) while promoting whiteness as norm.

In Brazil, “citizenship rights are unequally distributed according to race,” and “differential treatment remains codified in Brazilian law” (ROTH-GORDON, 2016, p. 54). One site of the enactment of such racial injustice is schooling. Brazil’s educational system is deeply segregated (BARTHOLO *et al.*, 2020; FERNANDES, 2017; WINDLE, 2021); “students of African descent are relegated to underfinanced public schools...while economically privileged White children attend private schools” (HERNÁNDEZ, 2005, p. 688). This is problematic; worldwide, the Black population in Brazil is second only to Nigeria’s.

Whereas Brazil avoided state-sponsored/*de jure* segregation—e.g., South Africa, the U.S. South—Black Brazilians have lived under a cumulative cycle of disadvantages (ROTH-GORDON, 2016), visible in Brazil’s *de facto* schooling segregation; this is illustrated “by the racialized treatment Afro-Brazilian children receive in school” and by the fact that “the majority of Brazilian teachers view Afro-Brazilian students as lacking the potential to learn” (HERNÁNDEZ, 2013, p. 90). These deficit beliefs are illustrated by teachers who make racist comments such as: “They can’t learn, they’re not disciplined, they’re lazy and they give up too soon” (p. 90).

Racist ideas are pervasive in “textbooks children are assigned, in which Black people are consistently depicted as animal-like, as socially subordinate, and in other stereotyped manners” (NASCIMENTO, 2001, p. 519). It is also illustrated by stereotypes that reflect the white racial frame (FEAGIN, 2020), which delineates normative conceptualizations of inclusion and belonging in Brazil. The white racial frame governs our social imaginaries, and dominant notions of righteousness are foundational to the (re)inscription of stereotypes, such as Northeastern dialects being wrong and Northeastern people being slow and/or lazy. As someone who is proud of being a Northeasterner, I understand that because around 40% of enslaved Africans were shipped to Brazil as cargo, prejudices and bigotries associated with the Northeastern region of Brazil are highly racialized. They mirror some of the very same stereotypes ascribed to those who live in the Southeast of the United States, the region where enslaved Africans arrived as cargo in 1619 (HANNAH-JONES, 2021).

As Feagin (2020) noted, “this dominant frame is an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (p. 11). Rejecting racism and entangled bigotries as an act of individuals and instead seeing them as a system that is produced and reproduced, affords an important examination of “the deep structural foundation in which...acts of racial discrimination are regularly imbedded” (p. 13).

To understand the importance of this special issue, the reader must recognize that the research presented here opposes longstanding research on schools and schooling, which sponsor, even without naming it as such, “a dominant, white created racial frame that provides an overarching and generally destructive worldview, one extending across white divisions of class, gender, and age” (FEAGIN, 2020, p. 18). Over time, the power of the white racial frame has prevailed, coming to index desirable, (over)valued, and appropriate ways of communicating, being and behaving in Brazilian schools and society. A white racial frame very much shapes our understanding and enactments of equity, belonging, and justice.

In “the predominantly Afro-descended northeast state of Bahia...school officials there view children of Afro-descent as deficient in their capacity to learn” (HERNÁNDEZ, 2013, p. 90). This is not isolated to the state of Bahia but a situated representation of how Afro-Brazilians are positioned and paradigmatically positioned in schools, schooling, and society. These “majoritarian” stories of Brazilian public schooling uphold racial injustice, are rooted in a long legacy of racism, and “carry layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them” (SOLÓRZANO; YOSSO, 2002, p. 28).

Through empirical counter-stories that reject majoritarian stories rooted in crisis narratives that pathologize Black Brazilian students, the Brazilian education researchers in this special issue offer glimpses of the ingenuity of Brazilian public school students. The significance of this research crosses the physical boundaries that delineate Brazil as a nation. “This pattern of racial segregation is replicated throughout much of Latin America” (HERNÁNDEZ, 2005, p. 689). As such, these studies question equating “the absence of state-sanctioned barriers to access as an indicator of the absence of discrimination” and invite us to “consider informal and de facto forms of racial exclusion” (TWINE, 1998, p. 59), shedding light onto other settings where de facto racial segregation characterize schools and schooling and inviting us to work toward equity and the pursuit of justice.

EQUITY, NOT EQUALITY

In 2007, Brayboy and colleagues suggested: “the future of race scholarship in education needs to be centered not on equality but rather on equity and justice” (p. 159). Essential to this suggestion is distinguishing between equality and equity. This is because many times, these terms are problematically conflated. Brayboy and colleagues note that equality means “sameness and, more specifically, sameness of resources and opportunities. This concept of equality is the long-term goal of a just society: children, regardless of race, socioeconomic class, or gender, should have access to the same resources and opportunity outcomes” (p. 159-160). Yet, given highly unequal realities (briefly explored in the previous section), equality will keep such inequities in place. Equity, on the other hand, means “a system where unequal goods are redistributed to create systems and schools that share a greater likelihood of becoming more equal” (p. 161).

Equity is “not predicated on the equality of conditions or tools, but...on having the tools, strategies, and approaches to support children’s development in ways that afford an equality of outcomes” (SOUTO-MANNING *et al.*, 2019, p. 64). As noted before (SOUTO-MANNING, 2013), in order to deepen our understanding of equity, we need not only to “examine...[our] own biases and prejudices,” but to also reflect on questions such as: “Do I understand that equity requires eliminating

disparities of access to opportunities and resources—what some might call fairness or justice? And, sometimes—when I offer equality (giving everyone the same thing)—I fail to meet this requirement?” (SOUTO-MANNING, 2013, p. 13). Additional questions to consider are:

- Does every child I teach have the opportunity to achieve success to their fullest capability? Do race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, language practices, dis/ability, and other social and cultural identifiers influence possible outcomes? How will I ensure equality of (possible) outcomes?
- Do I tend to advantage children whose race, ethnicity, religion, or languaging practices are aligned with those dominant in society? If so, how will I interrupt these biases?
- Do I understand that equity requires getting rid of differences of access to opportunities and resources? How have I, and how will I intentionally and systematically work to interrupt inequities and eliminate disparities for the students I teach? For their families and communities?
- Do I recognize that when I give everyone the same thing, am I likely to foster inequity? (SOUTO-MANNING *et al.*, 2019, p. 64)

Equity means “that every student has access to all the resources they need in light of persisting historical inequities” (BRAYBOY *et al.*, 2007, p. 168). In the absence of such conceptualization equity, Black and Brown children and youth are told that they do not belong in school. They are subjected to the political project of not belonging.

THE POLITICS OF (NOT) BELONGING

Not belonging is a political process of exclusion, which harms young children, youth, families, and communities positioned at the margins of society and often treated as “lesser than.” The concept of belonging as political project and process was first developed by Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011), who identified and troubled everyday borderings in society keeping status quo inequities in place (YUVAL-DAVIS *et al.*, 2019). Although these borders are not demarcated on a map, they determine who belongs and who does not, upholding whiteness as a yardstick to belong, a property on which belonging is predicated (HARRIS, 1993). To understand or comprehend the politics of belonging, it is important to consider the axes of belonging (SUMSION; WONG, 2011):

- Who is ascribed to belonging in Brazilian schools, schooling, and society? Who is not? How is such designation racialized?
- Who are the children and youth who often navigate the tension between wanting to belong in schools and schooling (abiding by norms set by whiteness) and their homes and communities? Might these tensions harm and eventually work to push children and youth out of school?
- What is the expected performance of belonging? For whom is this performance aligned with home and community practices, values, and legacies? For whom are school and home practices, values, and histories at odds?

These questions matter as they help us identify inequities and injustices. They urge us to (re)consider “how assimilationist policies and practices relate to racial inequity” (BRAYBOY *et al.*, 2007, p. 165). To be sure, the lack of choices—such as private school vs. public school— “is the result of policies and practices that are imbued with Whiteness, creating and sustaining structural racism” (p. 165-166).

A situated representation and enactment of the politics of belonging is segregation—whether *de jure* or *de facto*. This segregation has material effects. In fact, “research indicates that material resources are highly correlated to race” (BRAYBOY *et al.*, 2007, p. 169). However, for equity to be achieved, Black, Brown, and Indigenous students have to “have equitable (which may mean unequal to ensure fairness) access to material resources associated with increased academic achievement” (p. 169). Such material resources refer to financial resources and how these resources are invested.

Nevertheless, public schools in Brazil have “fewer resources—disproportionately, schools that serve students of color—have higher discipline than” private schools, which have far more funding. This disproportional distribution of resources affects and informs students’ sense of belonging—for example, is the curriculum reflective of their values, voices, images, practices, histories, and legacies? For Black, Brown, and Indigenous students in Brazilian public schools, the answer is often no. To compound matters, in such settings where resources are limited, conceptualizations of justice tend to be defined criminally (WINN, 2018).

TOWARD WHAT JUSTICE?

According to Howard Zehr (2014), there are two distinct views of justice. One of them, criminal justice, is pervasive and ingrained in Brazilian public schools and schooling. Criminal justice defines a crime as “a violation of the law and the state,” which creates guilt (p. 20). As such, this conceptualization of justice “requires the state to determine blame (guilt) and impose pain (punishment). The nucleus of criminal justice is the understanding that offenders must get what they deserve. This kind of justice is not aligned with equity and belonging; instead, it further criminalizes, excludes, and segregates. Ultimately, it punishes individuals for societal conditions and inequitable systems. On the other hand, restorative justice posits that crimes are violations, and “create obligations” (p. 19). From this perspective, justice is predicated on a process that “involves victims, offenders, and community members in an effort to put things right” (p. 20). The nucleus of restorative justice is attending to “victim needs and offender responsibility for repairing harm” (p. 21).

If we are to foster equity and work toward a politics of belonging that supports true and full inclusion, abolishing borders of exclusion and systems of segregation, we must stop focusing on what rules or laws have been broken and instead focus on who has been hurt. We must stop investing in who did *it* and instead seek to assess and address their needs. Finally, instead of dispensing remedies based on what is deserved, we need to embrace our shared obligation to right historical and contemporary wrongs—whether they are chattel slavery or current divestments in public schools and schooling.

In situated ways and via empirical methodologies, the articles comprising this special issue share a focus and concern for victims of inequities and injustices and their needs, researching with the potential “to repair the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically” (p. 22). Further, they position themselves as responsible for righting wrongs and engage various stakeholders. Instead of proposing the importing of solutions, they explore the complexities of mounting and ever-shifting systems of inequities experienced by teachers and students in public preschools and schools—including, but not limited to racism and the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked much of the data collection and analysis period of these studies.

A GLOWING CONSTELLATION GUIDING THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

As you explore the articles that comprise this special issue, you will have the opportunity to peek into windows of possibility. The articles represent studies that reject pedagogies of expectability, which tend to disempower and further pathologize Black and Brown students, instead, inviting us to move toward pedagogies of potentialities (SOUTO-MANNING, 2021) in Brazilian public schools. I will not fully explore them here, but will list them as a way of plotting a constellation, highlighting some of the brilliance of the individual articles presented herein.

José Ayron Lira dos Anjos, Joao Roberto Rátis Tenório da Silva, Ana Paula Freitas da Silva, and Ricardo Lima Guimarães researched the use of the didactic game “guess what?” for developing a deeper awareness of concepts in organic chemistry in public high schools in the countryside of the state of Pernambuco. Countering deficit discourses and pathological portrayals of public high school students in Brazil, who are often assumed not to know organic chemistry or to lack the interest or drive to engage with it, the authors found strength in the didactic game to re-mediate errors and questions. They found that shifting the remediation from the student to the pedagogy and learning process resulted in expansive learning and deeper understandings of organic chemistry concepts. As such, didactic games, as opposed to more traditional methods such as lectures and reading textbooks, offer great promise for teaching organic chemistry, comprising powerful zones of proximal development.

Eurivalda Ribeiro dos Santos Santana, Síntria Labres Lautert, José Aires de Castro Filho, Célia Barros Nunes, and Ernani Martins dos Santos problematized teacher professional development, devising a new process that brought together statistical literacy and equity. Public school teachers in four states of Northeastern Brazil participated in online teacher education, designed as a transformative learning community of practice, whereby teachers and teacher educators designed, implemented, and assessed the teaching of statistical concepts in ways that addressed inequities pervasive in the communities where the public schools were located. The RePARE spiral (reflection-planning-action-reflection) served as framework for the professional development of teachers and teacher educators on teaching and learning statistical literacy in Brazilian public schools. Engaging in (re)imagining and enacting RePARE-oriented professional development workshops online, this study used social networks and Google’s G-suite package. Results underscore the power and possibility of teaching statistics and/in the examination of issues of inequity. Further, results point toward the promise of the RePARE spiral

framing online professional development aligned with equity. This is because, as illustrated by this multi-site study, the RePARE spiral attends to the unlearning process often absent in more traditional and dominant professional development models. Such unlearning is pivotal for equity to be considered, explored, understood, and enacted pedagogically.

Izumi Nozaki, Eliseu Pichitelli, Claudio Jose Santana De Figueiredo, Itamar Jose Bressan, and Rinalda Bezerra Carlos attended to how beginning teachers coped with the implementation of curricular reforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in the state of Mato Grosso. This qualitative study benefitted from the technique of self-confrontation, supported by Activity Theory. The study revealed the limited and limiting technological resources and materials students and teachers had. Yet, even as it identified compromised material conditions, the pandemic served as a backdrop whereby beginning teachers displayed a strong tendency to develop empathy for students and families. The beginning teachers who participated in this study reported more sensible and humane attitudes towards families and children, acknowledging how the system and context positioned them in fragile and vulnerable ways. Instead of blaming families and children—for their lack of care, dedication, and attention—the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic brought systemic systems of inequity into sharp focus for these beginning teachers per study findings. With this new understanding—that it was the system that needed repair, and not the families—beginning teachers moved away from pathologizing students and families being served by public schools. Implications shed light onto how teacher education programs need to transcend the preparation of teachers being comprised solely of content development or teaching methods, more centrally attending to paradigmatic shifts in the preparation and development of teachers.

Amidst the social isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of classes in a municipal early childhood education system in Goiás (in March 2020), Luciana da S. Oliveira Lemes, Cristina M. Madeira-Coelho, Rhaisa Naiade Pael Farias, Carolina Helena M. Velho and Moara V. Albuquerque Marroquin developed and implemented a critical and creative approach to in-service early childhood teacher education. Focusing on preparing early childhood teachers to generate, implement, and assess pedagogical alternatives in the context of the conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, these researchers shifted their focus from individual teacher to teacher collective as unit of intervention and analysis. Although much prior research has focused on individual processes in the development of pedagogical knowledge and practices, prioritizing objective notions of teaching, this article sheds light on the importance of collective and subjective (situated) meaning making processes. In their examination, the authors found that meaning making processes subjectively produced by the teachers as a social group matter. The researchers employed subjectivity theory combined with qualitative epistemology to arrive at this important finding. This study found that teachers' experiences in collectively-designed professional development has significantly impacts their learning, conceptualization, understanding, and enactment of their role and/in teaching and learning.

Lucia Virginia Mamcasz-Viginheski, Sani de Carvalho Rutz da Silva, Elsa Midori Shimazaki and Marcio Pascoal Cassandre undertook an intervention research study of applied nature, aiming to analyze the role and contributions of material, tactile,

and descriptive adaptations in the teaching and learning process of fractal geometry for students with visual impairment. In particular, they attended to students' access to the curriculum and to learning content on this specific area and topic. This study took place in an educational service center specializing in educating students with visual impairment in a municipality in the midwestern region of the state of Paraná. Whereas there were identifiable gaps in students' conceptual understandings of mathematical concepts necessary for learning fractal geometry, findings indicated that the use of adapted materials for teaching content-specific concepts, such as tactile images, contributed to students' acquisition, development, and conceptual understanding. Implications shed light on the need for teacher education to juxtapose mathematics and inclusive education, thereby preparing teachers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities.

André Luis Santos de Souza, Ana Carolina Carmo Leonor, and Ana Luisa Borba Gediel studied remote teaching, inquiring into issues of accessibility in the education of the Deaf. To do so, they undertook an analysis of the platform "se liga na educação." Within the context of COVID-19-related school closures and the move to remote teaching, inequities in access were exacerbated, comprising an additional obstacle to students' access schooling, now remote. In particular, they analyzed the bilingual didactic material produced by the Secretary of Education of the State of Minas Gerais. They made it available online to serve Deaf students during the remote instructional period correspondent to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a methodological approach, the video classes of the "Se liga na educação" platform were analyzed with a focus on student accessibility and learning outcomes. While the video lessons in Libras (Brazilian sign language) can be regarded as a legal and sociocultural advance in education for Deaf students, many gaps still make it impossible for Deaf students to have equitable access to schools and schooling. For example, the lack of subtitles in the videos exemplifies a barrier. Gaps in a number of areas defined by the National Base Curriculum exemplify another. While advances were made, more is needed to foster equity for Deaf students in Brazilian public schooling.

Marina Jacinto da Silva Oliveira, Isabel Pauline Lima de Brito, and Maria Auxiliadora Soares Padilha undertook a study on public school teachers' knowledge and repertoire of active methodologies and tools. Countering basic education's tendency to be limited to lectures and the transmission of content from teachers to students, often positioned as passive and submissive, and the proven ineffectiveness of such a pedagogical approach, their research study attended to active learning in an online teacher education course designed as an intervention at the onset of a remote teaching in the municipal network of Recife, in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. Via the analysis of pre- and post-intervention survey measures, they found that whereas most teachers claimed to know *active methodologies*, most did not know how to employ them, nor are they privy to the array of pedagogical tools such methodologies entail. Findings underscore the importance of professional development for teachers on active methodologies, as reported knowledge did not translate into the understanding or the enactment of active methodology practices and tools. Further, there was limited understanding of access and engagement as levers for equity. Implications underscore the need for professional development on active methodologies, attending to how these can leverage more equitable educational experiences.

Finally, situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Juliano Camillo, Leonardo Gonçalves Lago, and Cristiano Rodrigues de Mattos examined monological education in public schools in Santa Catarina, an ingrained pedagogical approach in Brazilian public schools. Positioning the Brazilian public school context as a situated representation of a pervasive phenomenon—the prevalence of teacher talk and control enacted via questions resulting in short student responses not to exceed three words and teacher feedback focusing on correctness—the authors had initially sought to build on the increasing research evidence that through dialogue, students are more likely to learn, retain learning gains for longer periods of time, and develop important reasoning skills. Deploying research-informed strategies to promote educational dialogue, this study engaged a classroom-based intervention focused on the development of teachers’ dialogic practices via a school-based teacher professional development program. Interrupted by the COVID-19-related closure of public schools after the first intervention session, the researchers shifted their focus to documenting what happened to classroom dialogue during the pandemic. They documented the unequal access to the internet and computers, considering the impact of obstacles in access to modes of communication. Findings indicate that the material conditions associated with the pandemic imposed a monologic model of education, despite teachers’ efforts to promote interactions and cultivate dialogue. Importantly, the researchers identified the keen importance of material dimensions, conditions, and resources to dialogical pedagogical practices, largely absent in prior research.

Together, these research articles illustrate the power of constellations to guide us toward a more equitable and just future. As in the lyric of the recent song *All of You*, featured in the Disney movie *Encanto*, together, the articles presented herein are a glowing constellation. While academic research is typically “full of stars and everybody wants to shine,” this powerful network of researchers, cultivated and sustained since 2019 via the Research Teaching and Learning Project (supported by the Lemann Foundation), understands that in isolation, even the most stellar research projects will not sufficiently or fully address the long history of inequity and injustice, which continues to pervade Brazilian public schools and schooling. However, together, they offer constellations that show us the need to shift our paradigm, attending to the brilliance and ingenuity of Black and Brown and Indigenous children, and guiding us and our beautiful and complex country toward a more equitable and just future.

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