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Black African families in Brazil: migration and the challenge of multilingualism in early childhood education

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Multilingualism is one of the main challenges in early childhood education and is found in Brazilian preschools when receiving international migrant children and their families. The presence of migrants stresses the foundations of a monolingual educational system as well as it prompts urgent changing in this modality of primary education from an intercultural perspective. Based on semi-structured interviews carried out with public school teachers in São Paulo, we problematize the way that difficulties in the communication between the different languages of migratory flows from the African continent to Brazil have led to challenges in the relationship between families and school.

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Keywords: african migrant families, plurilingualism, migration, family-school relationship.

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Il plurilinguismo nell'educazione infantile è una delle sfide principali nel contesto dell'educazione infantile in Brasile, nel momento in cui si ricevono bambini migranti internazionali e le loro famiglie. La presenza di migranti scuote le fondamenta di un sistema educativo monolingua e allo stesso tempo provoca, a partire da una prospettiva interculturale, cambiamenti urgenti per questa modalità di educazione di base. Partendo da interviste semi strutturate con professori delle scuole pubbliche della città di San Paolo, problematizziamo come la difficoltà di comunicazione tra le diverse lingue presenti nei flussi migratori dal continente africano al Brasile abbiano generato sfide nella relazione famiglia-scuola. La famiglia che affronta l'esperienza migratoria si ritrova in un nuovo sistema sociale e culturale. Le nuove generazioni, e in particolare i bambini, giocano un ruolo importante in questo processo di (ri)definizione, che si realizza nel e con il contatto con i contesti educativi. Le analisi sono state portate avanti basandosi su referenze della sociologia dell'infanzia, degli studi delle migrazioni, degli studi interculturali e della diversità linguistica. L'articolo intende ampliare le conoscenze riguardo ai bambini migranti minori di sei anni e le loro famiglie nello spazio dell'educazione infantile.

Parole chiave: famiglie migranti africane, plurilinguismo, migrazione, rapporto famiglia-scuola.

Introduction

The history of Brazil is built through the contact of many languages, and the country has a diversity of indigenous and migrant languages. The many languages that are part of the Brazilian territory demystify the idea that monolingualism exists in Brazil. What has historically existed is a disregard for autochthonous and allochthonous languages, justified by a nationalistic order.

In addition to other issues like one-language legislation, the numerous massacres of the native population, diseases, and the eviction and exploitation of indigenous territory, many indigenous languages have been lost over time. There are now 154 indigenous languages spoken in Brazil according to estimates (Storto, 2019). During Brazil's colonial period, the African population endured the pain of slavery and its brutal and terrible practice, and the same loss happened to languages that the enslaved Africans carried with them.

The language hierarchy policy made Portuguese the official

language, to be used in different spaces. Thus, other languages were stigmatized leading to prejudice against speakers of linguistic varieties. The country's policy of nationalizing education resulted in the closing of schools and in the prohibition of the use of migrants' languages (Ferraz, 2007; Altenhofen, Oliveira, 2011). According to Article 13 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, Portuguese is the official language. As a result of this, the country is legally monolingual. However, if we look back at Brazilian history, we can see that Portuguese is just one language among many that are present there.

The language policies in Brazil are disastrous and the nationalization of the Portuguese language has generated a strong repression to speakers of other languages. The construction of an identity through the imposition of Brazilian Portuguese has been a way to exclude ethnic and linguistic groups from the Brazilian nationality. In addition, it can be looked at as a typically forced attempt to reduce these other groups to the Luso-Brazilian configuration. The concept of nationality could instead be redefined, thus culturally legitimizing it, and allowing for a fair redimensioning of the country's history (Altenhofen, Oliveira, 2011).

Throughout this article we discuss how the difficulty in understanding different languages seen in the migratory flows from the African continent to Brazil has created challenges in early childhood education. We thus seek to expand the field of knowledge on migrant children below the age of seven and their families in early childhood education.

1. Methodological procedures and the Brazilian social context

Therefore, this work is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers from the public school system in the city of São Paulo who work at Municipal Centers for Children's Education (CEIs), for babies from 0 to 3 years old, and at Municipal Schools for Children's Education (EMEIs), for children from 4 to 5 years old, all located in the central and eastern regions of São Paulo.

In view of the territorial distribution of the African migrant population in São Paulo, teachers from the municipal education network and from the direct and indirect network of Early Childhood Education based in the central and east zone regions of the city were invited to the research.

In the carrying out of the interviews all ethic principles were followed, amongst which the informing of the entire research development process to the participants as well as the unfolding of possible publications. They could also choose to stop participating at any moment they wished. The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Arts, Sciences, and Humanities of the University of São Paulo – CAAE no 50873015.0.000.5404.

The semi-structured interviews included basic questions supported by theories and hypotheses relevant to the research, allowing for the unfolding of the teachers' statements about the researched theme (Lüdke, André, 1986). During the interviews it was possible to collect data about the reception and insertion of African migrant children (Congolese, Senegalese, Nigerian, and Angolan). Emotional aspects of the interviewees were valued, as there was a range of gestures, expressions, intonations, non-verbal signals, hesitations, and changes of pace: non-verbal communication, whose capture is relevant for the understanding and validating of what was effectively said. To preserve the anonymity and integrity of the subjects following research ethics (Santiago, 2022), the names of the teachers, children, and their families were replaced by pseudonyms and we did not identify which of the two teaching modalities of early childhood education the teachers worked in.

Our *focus* was on African children and their families because the black population in Brazil suffers not only the perverse effects linked to xenophobia, but it also faces racist practices that still perpetuated throughout and since the historical process of enslavement. That's why the relation between blacks and whites in Brazil is marked by discrimination and social inequalities that are reflected in the migration process and by a social construction that is selective and exclusionary, which still does not welcome the black African and Afro-Brazilian population in the same way it welcomes the population of European origins (Demartini, 2004; Freitas, Silva, 2015).

It is worth noting, as Mellino points out in an interview with Santiago (2018), that in Latin America, since it has a reality more permeated by inequalities based on skin color, there is a reflection on the racial issue that is very different from what exists in Europe; there are differences in how this hierarchical system is seen.

So, in the Brazilian context, the analytical use of the concept of race is important, specially in sociological analyses in order to give meaning to social life and to understand the inequality present in this reality, allowing for the analysis of a certain set of phenomena (Guimarães, 2003). In Brazilian society, black people do not have the same access to jobs, schooling, nor to social integration. As discussed in Santiago (2020), it is a society marked by slavery structures and racially designed to privilege the white population.

When adopting as residence a country with a majority black population such as Brazil, Congolese, Senegalese, Nigerian, and Angolan families often do not expect it to be a society with racist practices. However, daily life reveals segregated spaces, segregation policies, and racism. Indeed, xenophobia, the repulsion of foreigners, reveals the common feature of racial discrimination (Farah, 2017). Within these political, social, and cultural processes, everyday actions strengthen stereotypes, thus reinforcing pre-established ideas about black people.

2. Plurilingualism in early childhood education

Although there are different works related to the linguistic situation of the migrant population in the Brazilian context, mainly within the adult population, we refer to the studies with migrant children under seven years old and their families in the Italian context, whose one of the main characteristics is the historical presence of the migrant population in the educational field. As Zaninelli (2015) points out, we have seen researches in this area since the mid-1990s that investigates multilingualism in Italian kindergartens, preschools, and schools. *The children of migration*, as migrant children are called in Italian intercultural literature, are described as “children being suspended between two languages”: the maternal, or of affection, and the school’s, or of socialization.

In Brazil, few studies in the field of childhood discuss the presence of foreign language-speaking children in public educational institutions. Among them, we highlight the work of Freitas and Silva (2015), conducted in three schools in the municipal early childhood education network in São Paulo. The authors discuss the contradictory and tense aspects witnessed in the research on the adaptation of Bolivian

children. They point out that the families of the Bolivian children value the teaching of Portuguese, since mastering the language represents an acquisition of permanence and the definitive inclusion in the host country.

The challenges of multilingualism in Brazilian early childhood education are accompanied by discourses that hold the migrant families themselves, who do not always master the official language of the new territory they inhabit, responsible for teaching the new language to their children. We can see this in teacher Sabrina's speech, transcribed below:

I even heard lines like: "Families must teach Portuguese to their children! How can they live in another country without knowing the language? How will the family teach them Portuguese? In fact, many children learn it in the early childhood education unit. There they will learn the codes, the language, and the culture of the new country" (Sabrina – interview granted in 2021).

In Brazil, Portuguese is the language that will allow migrant children to complete their studies and have better chances of social insertion; the mother tongue, in turn, is that of the family, which ensures cultural belonging, connection with the country of origin, and family memory. Here, it is important to bring Freire's (2020, p. 80) thoughts to the discussion, who alerts us that it is "important to always be clear that it is part of the dominant ideological power to inculcate in the dominated the responsibility for their actions". Thus, we can problematize the discourses that blame and hold migrant families responsible for not teaching their children the language of the host country. Among the questions we raise are the following: do family members of migrant children need to know the host country's language in order to teach their children? How do teachers establish relationships with migrant families despite their lack of knowledge of languages other than Portuguese?

The question posed by Professor Sabrina regarding the mandatory teaching of the host country's language by migrant families is complex and involves several factors. Among them is the analysis of the migratory process itself, which may have occurred violently, in precarious conditions, or as refugees, which demands the empathy of people. Another aspect that deserves attention regarding the teaching or not of

the language of socialization to migrant children is the relationship between family and child education institutions. While teaching or not the host country's language by the family members is based on a bias of reference and individual choice, in the case of kindergarten teachers, it is based on a collective view of the need to teach the language.

In this sense, teacher Simone tells us about an experience in which the lack of knowledge of the African child's mother tongue causes its confusion with child's babbling:

The African boy was very expressive; he liked to shout and sing, but he didn't speak yet. So I kept singing with him and playing with him. And sometimes he spoke some words that nobody understood but everybody loved. Sometimes he would shout "Gueregue!", then the other children and I would shout together as well. Then we found out that he also shouted like this at home, but his mother said he wasn't Angolan, and from then on we didn't know what language he spoke. I think he couldn't speak Angolan, so he spoke Gueregue, and we had fun (Simone – interview granted in 2021).

In situations like the one described above, we need to be careful not to create stereotypes about languages. No matter how good intentions may be, without the proper training we end up reproducing distortions, as well as running the risk of nullifying the children's protagonism, as Pereira states:

In the spaces of kindergartens and preschools, children's protagonism can be promoted or erased depending on the relationships they establish with adults and the creation of moments in which children can collectively make decisions. As social actors, through playing and interacting with each other and with adults, children are the protagonists of their lives, as well as creators of childhood cultures (2022, p. 3).

Thus, the challenge is in overcoming the barriers that arise in the daily migration routine in early childhood education and in taking an assertive stance in practices and discourses. Black African children and their families, while accessing Brazilian early childhood education, are marked by the migration narrative. In this sense, as Hall (2000) points out, identities should be thought of as constructs within representation, through culture, resulting from an identification process that positions us within the definitions provided by cultural discourses.

Furthermore, migrant families live the paradox of temporariness, which influences how they are perceived and treated in the political, economic, social, cultural, and educational spheres. They are called (when not by necessity) to return identical to what they were to the place they should never or only temporarily have left. Finally, the immigration society, despite it having defined for the figure of migrant workers a statute that installs them provisionally as foreigners, denies them any right to a recognized permanent presence. In other words, if it exists in any other way than with the continuous provisionality or in any other way than as a merely tolerated presence (however long-standing this tolerance may be), it consents to treat as long as it finds some interest in doing so as if this provisionality could be definitive or indefinitely extended (Sayad, 1998).

3. The relationship between migrant families and institutions of early childhood education

Plurilingualism, seen as an obstacle to building relationships between migrant families and institutions of early childhood education, may hinder the establishment of communication and empathy processes and people's access to social rights. In the Brazilian context, the perspectives on black African families must be differentiated since many of them settle in Brazil.

Not infrequently, due to borderline situations with (physical) survival usually being the priority, learning the host country's language needs to be understood within the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the migrants. We remember that many black African migrants speak more than one language, not only Portuguese. This reality presents a significant challenge in the daily life of educational institutions, as stated by teachers Rebeca, Simone, and Pietra:

We found difficulty dealing with the family because I didn't understand them. They didn't speak my language, and I didn't speak their language either. They didn't speak European Portuguese and they spoke French, so it was very complicated for us to understand one another! They called us "madam", I thought it was elegant, but I didn't understand why they called me that way, because I was a teacher. The language was always the most difficult part. The challenge was always in talking to the family, not to the child because with the child we can

manage, right? Even more so since he joined us when he was 2 years old, and then we taught him Portuguese by playing (Rebeca – interview granted in 2021).

We had two African kids in our class, but one of them didn't speak Portuguese, so he got more attention from us because of the language barrier. Since the other one could speak Portuguese, he didn't have so many communication problems with his parents. The other one did! His mother remained silent, so it was more complicated. We didn't know where to start; I just smiled at her and was afraid to even talk. There was also prejudice from others. In the classroom, I didn't notice any different treatment. It was all very natural even though he didn't speak the same language. And then, at the end of the year, he was already a little Brazilian, talking all mixed up and in his own way, but he was already interacting well. The problem was the relationship with the family, because for the children it was all a game (Simone – interview granted in 2021).

I had to look for ways to talk to this family, “because my French wasn't good enough”. There is no way we can even understand anything the other says! This is the most challenging part of having an African child: the exchange with the family is complicated. After all, we don't have to take only the child in, right? (Pietra – interview granted in 2021).

It is worth bringing to discussion the contributions of Spivak (2010), which elucidate that a subaltern is someone whose voice cannot be heard. The subaltern's and the colonized's speeches are mediated by the voice of someone else who puts themselves in the position to claim something on behalf of another person. When early childhood education professionals don't know the language spoken by the family it is difficult to establish a relationship that allows the migrant family to exercise their right to participate in the school community. The languages of origin of black African migrant children and their families run the risk of being considered simply as a source of interference to be combated, thus missing opportunities to fully develop the potential of the multilingual condition for everyone.

These points make it possible for us to think about the valorization of the different languages present in the context of early childhood education. In this sense, we state that the basic principles of democra-

tization of early childhood education in Brazil are directly related to the notion of childhood and society, autonomy, and communicative interaction among people who build history and pedagogical work. The educational institution, child, and family all participate in this articulation.

In the Italian context, Chini and Andorno (2018) highlight that secondary schools have a huge variety of languages used by foreign students in the various contexts of daily life, thus challenging educational institutions to adapt didactically in order to teach the local language as a second language. As an example of this perspective, in Brazilian early childhood education institutions it is necessary to establish dialogues for the sharing of knowledge; for this, all languages need to be incorporated and valued in everyday life.

It is necessary to emphasize that this is the first stage of basic education in the Brazilian context, whose function is to integrate care and education in a complementary action for the family and the community. To fully meet the rights of the child, early childhood education institutions must organize their pedagogical and curricular proposals in order to include spaces and moments for family participation, dialogue, and daily listening (Brazil, 2009). Although the mentioned legislation makes no mention of migrant children it provides subsidies for the assertion that, in the context of welcoming families, the participation of all involved parts is crucial. Thus, the arrival of African migrant children and their families in daycare centers and preschools strains the tripod of educational institutions, children, and their families, since it is a school duty to guarantee the right to community participation.

When not understood, the relationship between different languages and different forms of social organization creates obstacles in the process of welcoming black African children into the educational routine, including the understanding of the children's names and their documentation, as highlighted by teacher Simone:

I had L., who was G., an African boy who didn't speak Portuguese. We called him G. Only later on we had a conversation with his mother and we realized his name was L. That is his first name! But his document was in another language and we mixed everything. There is this problem with documentation. We didn't know, of course! As

teachers, we take the first name on the document. So afterwards we started calling him by his correct name (Simone – interview granted in 2021).

The linguistic barrier often causes teachers to get confused by common things. However, this is a recurrent problem not only in Brazil, since each nation/culture may have its own rules of operation, registration standards, and writing, among other aspects, which differ according to each society. Certain socio-historical conditions also dimension this issue, as teacher Cláudia tells us:

The parents spoke very little Portuguese. They were of African origin; if you want to know where from I can get the information later. They spoke very little Portuguese and we invited them to a June party to explain what a June party is. It is a celebration of the planting of corn, that is the simplest way we could explain it to them. To get clothes, just go to any store and say, “clothes for June Festival”. The girl arrived with the most expensive, most beautiful dress you can imagine, so much so that everyone was astonished, but the party at school was from 1:00 to 4:00, and the girl’s dance was at 2:30. And then it was a shock. Everybody stopped and looked; the girl was wearing the most wonderful clothes. The principal told us that they did the following: because it was July, they reorganized everything and opened all the tents so that the girl could go to all the tents. Since they are small children, when we rehearse all of the teachers learn the choreography, because the choreography is simple for us and we accompany the children when there is the need. So they made a quadrille just for her. “To this day the family hasn’t understood what a June party is”. For them it made no sense, because the girl was wearing a gala dress and everyone was dressed in chita (traditional Portuguese cotton fabric) (Claudia – interview granted in 2021).

The difficulty in understanding the language can create embarrassing moments for both the family and the institution’s professionals. Even though there was a lack of fluid communication between both parties, the management team together with the teaching staff tried to somehow repair the lack of dialogue caused by the linguistic incomprehension. This may not be, and probably is not, the only unforeseen event that arose in this context. However, we reinforce that using visual resources (such as photos or the object itself) could

facilitate the linguistic embracement proposal, given that one of the strategies used for communication between speakers of mutually unknown languages is gestures – when we point to something we want, for example. In the case of the June Festival, when talking about the clothes, they could have shown the family a dress or a photo of one.

It is understood that the misinterpretation of the girl's dress may also be linked to the cultural context. Because of their lack of knowledge of the host society's dress code the black African family may have thought that a party at an early childhood education institution required a particular piece of clothing since this was the first time they were participating in an event at the institution.

When we deal with migration from the African continent to Brazil the most representative nationalities of migrants who have children enrolled in the early childhood education network in the capital city of São Paulo are Angola, Cape Verde, Congo, and Nigeria. The latter countries have French and English as their official language respectively, while Angola and Cape Verde are Lusophones (Baeninger *et al.*, 2018; Santiago, 2022).

This aspect presents itself in the interviews with the female teachers, who commented on their surprise upon learning that migrants from the African continent spoke languages other than Portuguese: “When they said they were Nigerian, I thought they spoke Portuguese! But I didn't understand anything they said. I don't know what language they speak” (interview with Sabrina granted in 2021). Unfortunately, in the Brazilian educational context, there is still a lack of knowledge about African peoples' linguistic and cultural plurality. Linked to this process, distorted images are built concerning the different ethnic belongings of the early childhood education community members. In some cases, for example, the interviewed teachers pointed out the idea that Nigerians are not friendly, unlike Angolans, who speak the Portuguese language:

Generally Nigerians, as we hear from some people, they are seen as not very friendly. It's because they don't speak the language. If you don't speak the language, how will you be friendly? Angolans speak Portuguese, so they are already seen as friendly (Sabrina – interview granted in 2021).

Therefore, it is worth raising another question: do we have the same impression about non-black migrants who do not speak Portuguese? We raise this question to deliberate on the notion put forward by the teachers that non-Portuguese-speaking black migrants are not friendly. Is this a prejudice built concerning language as a social marker of difference, an issue linked to racism or is it the two intersecting poles?

The maintaining of stereotypes concerning certain groups is a self-gratification perspective. This occurs mainly when the judgments affected by prejudice are expressed in a social context marked by inequality; the black subject then becomes what the white subject does not want to be related to (Kilomba, 2019, p. 34). The stereotype surrounding Nigerians as unfriendly because of their language and cultural aspects is a way of justifying prejudice, providing underlying reasons for rejecting migrant groups. The purpose of stereotypes is, on the one hand, to justify conduct toward certain groups or individuals and, on the other, to provide aspects for the preservation of imaginaries toward certain racial or ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The data indicate that black African migrant children and their families not only speak a different language in phonological, syntactical, and technical terms but also in spatial-temporal coordinates and have ways of establishing relationships that are different from the ones we know. It is undeniable that in early bilingualism it is easier to achieve complete language acquisition due to the strong neuroplasticity during childhood, but this does not mean that late bilingualism is less valuable.

Strengthening family participation enables reciprocal exchanges permeated by mutual trust and respect between the school and family cultures. Meanwhile, the lack of dialogue between daycare centers, preschools, families, communities, social movements, etc. has led to mistaken images of children's experiences, not contributing to the solidity of the family-school relationship. Intercultural exchange involves all the people present in the pedagogical actions. It is not only a practice developed for the migrant children and their families but to all of the pedagogical team, because it is immersed in the perception of interconnected cultures and social relations. This allows for daycare centers and preschools to abandon the ethnocentric perspective that

still seems to dominate them and to assume a broader vision based on dialogue, focused on a dynamic education and open to new horizons.

Therefore, for the process of welcoming both children and black African migrant families to Brazilian land, it is essential not only to have the material and didactic resources in institutions of early childhood education but also projects and public policies related to the initial and continuing training of teachers in intercultural education, in order to meet these and other urgent demands in society.

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