

# Pausing to Breathe, but Is It Possible to Pause Whiteness in Teaching and Teacher Education?

## Narratives of Four Brazilian Physical Education Teacher-Researchers

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Collaboration

Critical Friendship

Narratives

Self-study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP)

Physical EducationTeacher Education (PETE).

*This self-study aims to analyze how white educators and liberal institutions played key roles in perpetuating racism and whiteness in the constitution of our teachers' identities and what movements we had to make to navigate through ruptures and face the discourses and practices that naturalize racial oppression in Brazil. This study explores unique elements from vignettes extracted from autobiographical narratives which relate to the experiences of four physical education teacher-researchers: a black woman, two black men, and one white man. As a theoretical framework, we discuss the concept of whiteness and how it acts in maintaining the racial privileges of whites in the country as well as its implications in teaching and teacher education. The lived experiences of each of us have led to mobilizing work with teacher education in four regions of the country. Our reflection allows us to collaboratively and intersubjectively fight for anti-racist education, navigating different and complex pathways as part of a teacher-researcher knowledge community. Our methodological choices were supported by the collaboration established by Garbett and Thomas (2020) as researchers who recognized themselves as critical friends in carrying out a self-study. The methodological approach takes the form of a collaborative self-study based on the practices of the four authors as teachers and teacher educators. We are concerned with our own well-being when we perceive everyday life and academic life in a racist country, besides the risks involved in anti-racist education and in the defense of social justice. The thematic analysis of our written narratives as primary sources was carried out in two phases. The outcomes from the narratives show the difficulties and opportunities faced by teachers. While the school routine for black teachers was configured as a space of silence, repression, punishment, and resistance, the welcoming, the well-being, and the feeling of belonging to that space only reverberate for the white teacher in the professionals' actions, notably facilitating his permanence in the school space. The dualism between body and mind for a black teacher is questioned with attempts to mask and colonize thought. We conclude that the anti-racist character of our intervention refers to the constant concern about how our students perceive the subjectivities of teachers and how they critically mirror these teachers. It is in this way that we assume our responsibility to materialize anti-racist education modes.*

## **Introduction – Context of the Study**

This self-study aims to analyze how white educators and liberal institutions played key roles in perpetuating racism and whiteness in the constitution of our teachers' identities and what movements we had to make to navigate through ruptures and face the discourses and practices that naturalize racial oppression in Brazil, where 89% of the population recognizes that racism exists, although 90% of them do not consider themselves racist. This reveals the naturalization of structurally racist and oppressive situations which make unequal relations between white and black people invisible. According to Kilomba (2019), it is necessary to incisively disassemble the normality of racism, and the violence and the trauma of being positioned as "the other", because racism episodes occur daily.

This study explores unique elements from vignettes extracted from autobiographical narratives which relate to the experiences of four physical education teacher-researchers: a black woman, two black men, and one white man. As a theoretical framework, we discuss the concept of whiteness and how it acts in maintaining the racial privileges of whites in the country as well as its implications in teaching and teacher education. The lived experiences of each of us have led to mobilizing work with teacher education in four regions of the country. Our reflection allows us to collaboratively and intersubjectively fight for anti-racist education, navigating different and complex pathways as part of a teacher-researcher community of knowledge (Sanches Neto et al., 2022). Our perspective is based on self-study methodology related to teacher education and collaboration between anti-racist teachers and critical incidents about social justice in our lived experiences (Pinnegar et al., 2020; Straubhaar, 2013).

## **Objective of the Study – Background**

The objective of this self-study is to reveal the dilemmas faced by the four authors in our permanent process of becoming anti-racist teacher educators. Through a politicization process of the idea of race as a structuring framework, Gomes (2012, 2017) shows that the black educator movement started to occupy a *sine qua non* (condition without which) place in the constitution of Education for Ethnic-Racial Relations (ERER) in Brazil with undeniable potential for emancipation. According to Gomes (2017), the black movement has strongly contributed to both state structuring in the sense of social justice, and to the construction of less unequal daily relationships. However, the invisibility of the black population in Latin America is a persistent problem that affects schooling and teacher education (Venâncio & Sanches Neto, 2020).

This problem has been tackled through collaborative strategies such as the mobilization power of black feminisms (Venâncio & Nobrega, 2020). These confronting initiatives share the search for social justice as a common parameter. However, there are contradictions and limits of the anti-racist agenda based on the opposition of whiteness instead of the centrality of blackness (Conceição et al., 2023). According to Silva (2019), we need to decolonize and de-enslave ideas and conducts by understanding the particular and common histories of all Brazilians and Latin Americans. In addition, legislation in Brazil establishes the democratic contribution as a prerogative and supports resistance to implementing curricula subsidized by whiteness in the school space (Müller & Cardoso, 2017).

## **Methodological Pathway – Research Design and Questions**

Our methodological choices were supported by the collaboration established by Garbett and Thomas (2020) as researchers who recognized themselves as critical friends in carrying out a self-study. The methodological approach takes the form of a collaborative self-study based on the practices of the four authors as teachers and teacher educators. We are concerned with our own well-being when we perceive everyday life and academic life in a racist country, besides the risks involved in anti-racist education and in the defense of social justice. The thematic analysis of our written narratives as primary sources was carried out in two phases.

In the first phase, we individually outlined our lived experiences and shared them in an online file format. We chatted weekly and asynchronously through a messaging application due to the demands for social distancing resulting from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the second phase, we collectively analyzed our narratives looking for common and discrepant elements, convergences, and divergences in our experiences in facing the "white presence" represented by the universalization of whiteness. We also used the online platform for synchronous meetings during this phase.

In the self-critical sense, as suggested by Ham and Kane (2004), we asked: How do we act in these situated spaces? And, similarly to the reflective process proposed by Craig et al. (2020), we asked ourselves: How do we share our perplexities in the community to which we belong to and how do we collaborate with each other? During the analysis, we found that controversial assumptions about social justice emerged from the coding process as we connected our experience as teacher-researchers with the reflection of Garbett and Thomas (2020, p. 296) on “deepening the understanding of what we wanted for ourselves in our personal and professional lives had an impact on the meaning we made of our roles in academia”. In our respective contexts, we also recognized the risks and difficulties related to “our norms of politeness, self-protection and our experiences with the impact of opening our way of teaching to public comments as something dangerous or uncomfortable for both the commentators and for who is being commented on regarding the work itself” (Garbett & Thomas, 2020, p. 299).

The thematic arcs we have identified are related to our educative trajectories in schooling, from early childhood education to high school, in higher education from undergraduate to post-doctorate, and in working as teacher-researchers in elementary and higher education. We organized the themes emphasizing each idiosyncratic perspective as a point of view (POV). Next, we reflected on these themes in light of the literature related to teacher education from an anti-racist perspective. Thus, we collaborated as each other's critical friends to discuss critical incidents identified in the autobiographical vignettes.

### **Findings – the Place of Whiteness in Our Schooling and Teacher Education Processes**

The metropolitan region of São Paulo was the common space for our development during elementary education. Luiz was the only child in his family and started studying in 1979. He always identified himself as black because he did not look like the people in his father's family and knew that he was the third generation free from bondage to slavery on his mother's side. His mother is black and his father, who died in 1987, was considered white, from a Spanish family. People of Hispanic descent in Brazil are part of the white population and the country's official census (IBGE) recognizes this. This perception of who is white mainly stems from European invasions and colonization.

Luciana entered elementary education in 1977. She studied in the east side of the city of São Paulo at the same public school, from the 1st year of elementary school until completing high school in 1987, in the neighborhood of Penha. Since childhood, Luciana's black body was always involved in the challenges posed by games carried out on the street and which she and her colleagues insisted on taking to school.

Willian is white and started his education in 1991, during his childhood in Guarulhos. His older brother had the responsibility to take him and pick him up at the pre-school which was close to the house where they lived. Meanwhile, his sister, also older than him, started doing housework when she arrived home from school, while his brother was free to be with friends on the street.

Luciano was born in 1986 in Guarulhos and has a younger sister, who is white. His mother is black, born in the countryside area of São Paulo, and his maternal grandparents are from the Northeast, with African and Indigenous ancestry. Luciano's father was born in the city of São Paulo, in Penha, and his paternal grandparents are from Minas Gerais, with Italian ancestry. Luciano started school in 1994.

#### **Luiz's POV #1 – Racism Manifests Itself in Many Ways in Everyday Life**

Some events marked Luiz's vision of how his black body was seen by others. One student wanted to hold hands with him in preschool because she wanted to prove that she was not afraid of blacks. During elementary school, Luiz experienced daily cases of racism regarding his hair and remembers a priest who threw away the bible of a black student in religion class. On the way back from school, Luiz saw a black boy being burned alive in front of a bar. In the 7th grade, he started playing basketball and noticed the prejudice of social class of the white physical education teacher, who scheduled few games with public school teams. When he was in 8th grade, civilian police broke into and invaded his home at night, rummaging through his school supplies looking for drugs. A black policeman held a gun to Luiz's head. During the 1980s, the nuns' school stopped offering high school because some students smoked marijuana. This forced Luiz to move to a public and technical school with the presence of more black students but with only two black geography and mathematics teachers. It was a politically troubled period due to the first presidential

elections after the military dictatorship. There was a strike by the teachers for almost three months, so Luiz changed schools again and started studying at night. The white students from the new school asked if he would be beaten if he got low grades because they did not understand how his grades were better than theirs.

### **Luiz's POV #2 – The Historically Invisible Mobilization of Black Women**

Racism was present in everyday situations in Luiz's university life, as well as the "white presence". For example, the small number of black university students in undergraduate courses – and at the University of São Paulo (USP) in general – is an indication of structural racism. This disparity was in fact maintained in the postgraduate course held at the State University of São Paulo (Unesp). As Luiz lived far from the USP campus (about two hours away by bus), he asked the family for whom his mother worked to stay together with her in the maid's room where she lived in the apartment, as the neighborhood was much closer (less than 1h away by bus). In Brazil, it is a common absurdity that residences in affluent neighborhoods are constructed with dependencies for domestic servants close to the kitchen and laundry so that the employees (usually black women) live in a part of the house or apartment and are at the disposal of the bosses (usually white) 24 hours a day. This is a remnant of the perpetuation of black enslavement in architecture and urbanism. Regarding invisibility, Luiz had two black professors at the undergraduate level, one of whom was a substitute, but neither of them declared themselves black, possibly because both have light skin. During a bus strike in the city, Luiz arrived late to campus because he had to walk. There was a test and the white teacher who applied the test answered him simply – "So what? Everyone else is here already" – when he justified his delay that day.

### **Luciana's POV #1 – Learning From Transgression**

Luciana later had three black teachers, two literacy teachers, one of whom also taught math and music, and a biology teacher in high school, and she remembers their names well. Her 2nd-grade teacher influenced Luciana by the quality of that transgressive time that was established in the classroom when she patiently attended to the students and followed their difficulties with affection. The other two teachers continued the transgressions with recognition strategies that Luciana would also learn if she looked at life at school and its contradictions. The existence of the monoculture of the body and the aesthetic taste, which helps to produce the logic of whiteness, is opposed by an ecology, the ecology of the body, and the aesthetic taste. "It produces other bodily logics, built by non-hegemonic groups in their different contexts and in power relations" (Gomes, 2017, p. 81). A contradiction was to identify that the public school environment in the periphery was characterized by attempts by other teachers to control the students' desires and bodily manifestations. Luciana suffered countless attempts to regulate her existence and a 6th grade white math teacher scornfully nicknamed her, in front of the whole class, for having cut her hair very short.

### **Luciana's POV #2 – Woman, Poor, Black... and University Student**

When Luciana entered the university in 1991 to take a degree in physical education, her father, despite all the happiness of the accomplishment, warned her: "Don't forget, you are a woman, poor and black"; a warning which reminded her that the discussion about feminism and abolitionism are fundamental theories and practices to understand the contemporary world (Davis, 2018). Her father did not read Angela Davis and was unaware of the North American context of imprisonment policies, nor of the social exclusion of women and young people considered disposable. However, his warning certainly influenced the way Luciana participated and became involved with activities and academic life. At the end of the 20th century, there were countless debates on how to define the category "woman". There were several struggles over who was included and who was excluded from that category. "In some ways, the struggle for women's rights was ideologically defined as a struggle for the rights of white middle-class women, expelling black, Latino and other ethnic minorities from the field of discourse covered by the category 'woman'" (Davis, 2018, p. 92).

Luciana knew that from that day on, as always, she would need to take advantage of all the good opportunities by explaining her resistance and existence. Her course load was full and she couldn't work. It was impossible to forget her original condition. Although she had three other black women as classmates, ethnic-racial discussions did not take place between them. They tried to insert the EREER discussion into an academic center event, but it had no impact. Discussions were limited to the discipline of capoeira, which also did not deepen the exoticism limits and racial

stereotypes which hegemonically traversed the experiences. Capoeira was the focus, decontextualized from any historicity with the resistance movements of the enslaved black population.

### **Willian's POV #1 – The Whitened Curriculum**

Memories related to commemorative dates denounce the superficial and punctual pedagogical treatment of the “Indian day” and “Black awareness” week. These themes are extremely important in a country like Brazil, having not received due recognition in examining the school curriculum dating from the 1990s, a period in which Willian attended elementary school. He started to have a black physical education teacher in the second stage of elementary school, being the first in his entire school trajectory. He continued with him until high school because he was part of the school's volleyball team and also team captain, and his teacher assisted him in his training. He was a teacher who substantially marked his school career, as he spent more time at school than at home, and sometimes had conversations regarding topics that could easily be framed as father and son, especially due to Willian's paternal absence. The neglect of the racial agenda continued until high school. It was even worse among students who were about to enter the world of work and university.

### **Willian's POV #2 – The Breakdown With the Critical White**

Only when Willian entered the Master's degree in Education at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) was when he began to carry out readings directed to the theme, mainly because professor Petronilha Beatriz Gonçalves e Silva reported on the legislation establishing the National Curriculum Guidelines for the ERER and for the Teaching of African and African History and Culture (Silva, 2018, 2019). His entry into graduate school happened concurrently with the work he was doing at the Foundation for Socio-Educational Assistance to Adolescents (CASA) with marginalized young people, mostly blacks from the outskirts. Nevertheless, it was a moment for Willian to approach researchers who investigated the universe of African-Brazilian cultural practices and the discipline of a dissertation and thesis seminar became fundamental for learning non-Eurocentric culture.

### **Luciano's POV #1 – The Discovery of Black Awareness in Spite of Light Skin**

Luciano did not always recognize himself as black, the racial issue was never a topic for reflection in the peripheral environments he frequented. The 1st cycle of elementary education was marked by many changes in schools due to economic and government policy issues which altered the configurations of schools, harming many students who started to study far from their homes. Luciano returned to study near his residence only in the 5th grade and stayed there until he finished high school. There was a shortage of teachers during high school, and at the same time most of those who were regulars performed the traditional practice of giving a lesson on the blackboard to copy and then give a grade, without much concern in explaining and establishing greater interaction with students. In this context, there were some black teachers and a pedagogical coordinator with whom he still maintains contact with until today. The race theme appeared when he was in groups with schoolmates, but always with a negative bias, through racist offenses dressed up as jokes or games. However, perhaps due to the fact that there were many black boys in the groups, Luciano was spared for being one of those who came closest to whites with his skin tone considered brown, or brownish (*pardo* in Portuguese). Although he did not openly discuss this issue, it was evident that there was an established hierarchy in which black boys carried the worst place on the unequal scales of values, although Luciano was not at the bottom of the pyramid, he was still very far from the top. This was how it was until the end of high school, in 2004, the year in which higher education was still only for a few people.

### **Luciano's POV #2 – When Policies Reach Out to Individuals**

In the third year of high school, Luciano received a form for enrolling in the National High School Exam (ENEM). Even without guidance on the relevance of this process, he decided to take the test. He remembered that he was the last to leave the classroom and in the essay question he chose to talk about racial prejudice, but the data he knew was only from what he had learned by listening to a hip-hop song by Racionais MC's, which introductory lyrics are:

*60 percent of young people from the outskirts without a criminal record have already suffered police violence. For every four people killed by the police, three are black. At Brazilian universities, only 2 percent*

*of students are black. Every four hours, a young black man dies violently in São Paulo. Primo Preto [Black Cousin] speaks here, another survivor.*

Luciano's life was intertwined with the words of the song and he was able to talk about his several black friends who unfortunately had been arrested and some who even died in exchanging shots with police. The result of the evaluation arrived after a few weeks and stood out for scoring 89% correctness in the essay, for which he could participate in a program called "The University for All Program" (Prouni), created under the government of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. So, Luciano went to his cousin's home who had a computer, and signed up for the physical education course, and a week later he was invited to enroll with a 100% scholarship. All of this even though he was never allowed to dream about Higher Education coming from a poor family, he was not encouraged to take a higher education course, and his father told him to stop wanting to be who he was not.

### **Outcomes**

Regarding the "so what" question of this self-study, bringing together the themes from the narratives shows the difficulties and opportunities faced by us in becoming anti-racist educators. Our teaching work encompasses experiences and challenges to materialize anti-racist conducts in basic education and higher education. We shared a critical analysis of Brazil's institutionally racialized school system. While the school routine for black teachers was configured as a space of silence, repression, punishment, and resistance, the welcoming, the well-being, and the feeling of belonging to that space only reverberate for the white teacher in the professionals' actions, notably facilitating his permanence in the school space. The narratives resonate with Gomes (2017) and Hooks (2013) who consider that the black body challenges the institutionalized and orchestrated space of oppression with its presence because it causes fear. In turn, fear comes from ignorance. The ignorant body is threatened because it uses masks of a forged intellectuality to silence the power and ways of life of black bodies. It is impossible for black teachers to hide their personal characteristics in front of a multicultural group of students. The black body enters the space, extensively occupying a place prepared to prevent and silence the incarnated expressiveness of the stories lived by the subjects who became teachers. The dualism between body and mind for a black teacher is questioned with attempts to mask and colonize thought.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As we recognized how our experience connects to the ERER, our personal histories led us to become anti-racist teacher educators. The career trajectory of each one of us led us to mobilize working with the teacher education of other teachers in three different regions of the country. However, the teaching work conditions were aggravated by the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic in the different spaces that we currently occupy in the Northeast (Luiz and Luciana), North (Willian), and South (Luciano) regions (Venâncio et al., 2022). According to Martins-Filho et al. (2021), the Covid-19 case-fatality rate is higher for black Brazilians in all regions. As a common challenge, we consider that the "white presence", made invisible by whiteness, is a conservative perspective of maintaining the status quo. For this reason, we ask: For whom does whiteness not exist? We understand that this questioning is in the progressive field and is also opposed to the neutral view of science and teaching. More than that, in the self-critical sense, we ask: How do we act in these situated spaces? Similarly to the reflective process proposed by Craig et al. (2020), we shared our perplexities in the community to which we belong and collaborated with each other.

We believe that there are some challenges in each context. For Luiz and Luciana, there is a need to deconstruct the fallacy of benevolence in the context in which they work because, as Ceará abolished slavery in advance for the financial interests of slave traders, racism is even more invisible than in the rest of the country. Brazilian federal government paid local farmers – to free their slaves – instead of paying enslaved black people any amount of money. However, Ceará has been acknowledged as a benevolent state in relation to the slavery system because its farmers were the first to earn such a payment. For Willian, there is a confrontation of whiteness in the predominant context of black and Indigenous people, with unrestricted access for whites who are uncritical, but who say they are critical. For Luciano, there are constraints in each critical position in the predominant context of European immigrants, such as conflicts over the education of his own son.



We conclude that the anti-racist character of our intervention refers to the constant concern about how our students perceive the subjectivities of teachers and how they critically mirror these teachers. It is in this way that we assume our responsibility to materialize anti-racist education modes, navigating multiple pathways and complexities way as part of a collaborative teacher-researcher community. Engaging in critical reflection together enables us to continue to fight, as it is the collaboration that mobilizes us to persevere in the struggle for social justice. In our individual education and professional trajectories, we reinforce the importance of self-education in the field of work and to value intersubjectivities. Finally, perhaps our current research findings offer a vision of another valuable self-study in the near future, either singly or collaboratively.

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