



# Teacher training and critical multicultural pedagogical practices

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## Abstract

This study aims to understand the construction of American basic education teacher training for the development of multicultural attitudes and practices in a school setting. With a qualitative approach, in a case study, through individual semi-structured interviews, the investigation was conducted with three basic education teachers and one university teacher who work with a critical multicultural education perspective in New York City. Narrative analysis shows that the teachers' life stories were impacted by experiences in social conflict situations and cultural and educational exclusion, especially concerning ethnic-racial diversity. These experiences were decisive in their search for teacher training and practice in a multicultural education conception. Training in this perspective was relevant to the adoption of inclusive educational practices; however, the exclusion experiences motivated the teachers' commitment to critical multicultural education.

Keywords: Multicultural education. Ethnic-racial diversity. Teacher training. Multicultural pedagogical practices.

## Formação docente e práticas pedagógicas multiculturais críticas

### Resumo

O objetivo desse estudo é o de identificar o modo que os professores do 2º ciclo do ensino fundamental compreendem e constroem metas para o ensino da ortografia, enfocando, especificamente, o trabalho com as relações letra-som da Norma Ortográfica da Língua Portuguesa. Tomamos como referência a classificação da ortografia elaborada por Morais (1998). Segundo esse autor a Norma Ortográfica apresenta regularidades (diretas, contextuais e morfológicas) e irregularidades em sua relação letra-som. Participaram dessa pesquisa 20 professores do 2º Ciclo de dois municípios da região metropolitana do Recife, sendo 10 professores de cada município (5 professores do 4º ano e 5 professores do 5º ano, de cada município). A coleta de dados foi realizada por meio de entrevistas. Os resultados apontaram que 80% dos professores entrevistados não tratavam a ortografia como objeto específico de ensino, nesse sentido não havia um planejamento voltado para as especificidades da relação letra-som da norma ortográfica.

Palavras-chave: Educação multicultural. Diversidade étnico-racial. Formação docente. Práticas pedagógicas multiculturais.

## Formación docente y prácticas pedagógicas con la educación multicultural estadounidense

### Resumen

El trabajo objetiva comprender cómo se constituyó la formación docente de profesoras de la educación básica estadounidense para el desarrollo de posturas y prácticas multiculturales en el ambiente escolar. Con enfoque cualitativo, del tipo estudio de caso, la investigación se realizó con tres profesoras de la enseñanza básica y una docente universitaria que actúan en la perspectiva de educación multicultural crítica, mediante entrevista semiestructurada. El análisis de las narrativas demuestra que las historias de vida de las profesoras fueron marcadas por vivencias en situaciones de conflicto social y experiencias de exclusión cultural y educativa, especialmente en relación a la diversidad étnico-racial. Estas vivencias fueron determinantes para la búsqueda de la formación y actuación profesional docente bajo una concepción de educación multicultural crítica. La formación en esa perspectiva se mostró relevante para la adopción de prácticas educativas inclusivas, sin embargo fueron las experiencias de exclusión que motivaron el compromiso de las profesoras con la educación multicultural crítica.

Palabras clave: Educación multicultural. Diversidad étnico-racial. Formación docente. Prácticas pedagógicas multiculturales.

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### Introdução

This study discusses teacher training within a critical multicultural education approach, which aims to empower the teachers, who start to acknowledge themselves and their students as members of social groups with their own diverse cultural identities that must be understood, considered and shared in a school setting (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, 2009; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010, 2013). It is based on Critical Pedagogy studies (BANKS, 1993, 1999; GRANT, 2008, 2014; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010, 2013; WILLIS; LEWIS, 1998) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy studies (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, 2009), whose thought essence is based on respect and appreciation of ethnic-racial groups' cultural identities as an indispensable factor to the processes of learning and inclusion of those groups in a school setting.

More specifically, this study stems off the multicultural education proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009; 2014<sup>1</sup>), directed at basic education teacher training, based on three big curricular units: a) teachers' self-reflection concerning their own and others' life stories and ethnic-racial identities; b) the ways in which ethnic-racial relations are structured within society and in a school context; and c) questioning the concepts of knowledge and curriculum,



traditionally discussed in school from a neutral, hegemonic worldview, regardless of ethnic-racial and cultural affiliations of diverse social groups.

This proposal reveals three pedagogical qualities shared by teachers who work with a critical multicultural education perspective: having strong commitment to their students' academic performance; basing their practice on the students' cultural competence, that is, allowing and encouraging them to express themselves according to the linguistic and behavioral patterns usually adopted by their community and social groups; and showing critical and reflective understanding of political and social problems concerning accommodations for minorities in society as a whole.

Contacting American scholars of multicultural education, due to a post-doctorate internship in Teachers College – Columbia University – between August 2014 and July 2015, caused us to reflect on the training and professional experience of basic education teachers who work with a pedagogical approach oriented by the respect and appreciation of culture and school inclusion of minority groups.

At the time, we devised the following question: how is the teacher training for the promotion of multicultural educational practices developed in the context of basic education in New York? We aimed to understand the construction of American basic education teacher training for the development of multicultural attitudes and practices in a school setting.

The study, as it contemplates the training and pedagogical practices of teachers within a critical multicultural education approach, becomes relevant for allowing us to deepen the debate around educational work with diversity, providing reflections about cultural and subjective aspects that permeate relations and processes of teaching and learning, often relegated to a background relevance in school routine.

## Methodological procedures

In order to understand teacher training and pedagogical practices within the critical multicultural education approach, we conducted a qualitative research (MINAYO, 2007), in the form of a case study (YIN, 2014), using semi-structured interviews as data collection tool. Qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for allowing us to consider participants' subjectivities and to analyze their narratives in more detail, considering singularities in an

inextricable relation between individual and collective and appreciating quality over quantity (FIALHO; SOUSA, 2017). We decided on the case study because it is “[...] an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (YIN, 2014, p. 16), that is, multicultural education in public basic education in New York.

We selected three basic education teachers to participate in the research, one teacher from each education level – early childhood, primary and secondary education –, who fulfilled the inclusion criteria: working in basic education in New York City, at public schools or institutions assisted on the conception of critical multicultural education. Contact with all three teachers took place through a Teachers College professor who researched and taught a course on multicultural education and who, likewise, agreed to join our research subject group.

The interviews – recorded, transcribed and textualized – with the teachers were carried out individually at Teachers College, had an average duration of two hours, and were based on the following topics: the teachers’ life path and academic and school education; training and experiences with multicultural education; and multicultural pedagogical practices used in the classroom.

The research was supported by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), under the number 14652168/2014, respecting ethical criteria. The teachers’ participation was previously authorized, after explanations concerning the research objectives and the privacy of respondents’ identities. The teachers were assigned fictional names: Clara is the Teachers College professor; Evelyn, the early childhood teacher; Rosie, the primary education teacher; and Sarah, the secondary education teacher.

Subsequently, we show the results for each teacher. Then, we endeavor to discuss them considering the similarities in their formative paths and pedagogical practices in multicultural education.

## **Clara: lecturer professor from Teachers College**

Professor Clara was born in Brazil, where she grew up. She went to vocational secondary school, formerly called “normal school”, and graduated in Law school at a public Brazilian university. After graduate school, she married



an American and moved to the United States. There she attended another graduate course, in the Education field, working as an early childhood teacher<sup>2</sup> and, after getting her Master's and PhD, started working as a university professor and became a lecturer at Columbia University's Teachers College.

According to Clara, her commitment to multicultural education follows her life path, starting in the first years of primary school, through her experience as a student in a school that followed Freire's pedagogy in Recife, Brazil. At that school, founded by Paulo Freire himself:

[...] we questioned everything! From everyday facts, involving school and family relationships, up to the concepts of world and humanity, prevailing the idea that there isn't a separation between what we experienced in school and the world outside its walls (CLARA, 2014).

She believes that the origin of her critical point of view on the world and education finds roots in that unique school experience. Later, when she graduated vocational school, Clara started working as a teacher in daycares and municipal schools in the periphery of her hometown. As she encountered disadvantageous economic situations in her students' families' lives, she was driven to an even more critical attitude towards the world and education in order to deconstruct the stigma that implies that poverty diminishes intellectual capacity. However, facing the precarious work conditions for teachers in Brazil at the time, when an early education teacher's salary wasn't enough to cover monthly expenses with transportation and meals, she decided to go to Law school, because she wanted to work for the social rights of families and communities in need, and it was a professional field with higher market value.

When she moved to the United States, though, Clara realized that she would have to start over professionally, since her Brazilian Law school diploma was of little use, legally, for her to work as a lawyer in that country. Thus, she returned to the Education field, at first taking on an assistant teacher position in an early childhood school, while simultaneously taking a night course towards a new degree, now in the Special Education field.

After graduating, she was promoted to teacher, no longer an assistant, always working at public schools. Concurrently, she kept studying, first getting a Master's degree and later a Doctor degree, both in the Education field. As a public school teacher, she started witnessing the educational drama of children

from immigrant families, particularly within the reality of families that came from Central America, an experience that strengthened her ties and her commitment to critical and inclusive educational proposals. According to Clara (2014), the illegal situation of many immigrant families in the United States frequently causes older children, especially girls, to leave school in order to take care of younger siblings at home while their parents work. Contact with that reality drove Clara, in her doctorate program, to study social and economic factors responsible for low academic performance indicators in students from immigrant families.

In that context, already familiar with academic literature in the multicultural education field, she realized that there were few studies concerned with debating the construction of curricula and teaching methodologies to help the teacher within a multicultural education critical conception. After that observation and based on the studies of Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy (BANKS, 1993, 1999; GRANT, 2008, 2014; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010, 2013; WILLIS; LEWIS, 1998) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995; 2009), she developed a teacher training proposal based on three pillars: the self, the teaching and the society.

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The first pillar, the self, aims to insert the teachers in an environment of readings, debates and activities that guide them to adopt a reflective attitude towards their students' and their own ethnic-racial and social identities. The second pillar, the teaching, demands that the teachers reflect on the school curriculum, observing two premises: respect towards ethnic-racial and cultural diversity and equity of opportunities in and outside the school environment. The third pillar, the society, makes the teachers question power structures and privileges present in society. Here the focus is on the relations between social inequality and school performance and on the impact of those in the subjects' social, cultural and professional lives.

We observed that understanding her own identity caused Clara to have a better perception of her cultural location in the world, since school tends to exclude many perspectives and points of view, not allowing students to see themselves in historical, social and cultural facts or in the construction of their own knowledge (SOUTO-MANNING, 2010; 2013). In that sense, we observe that one of the teacher's duties is building consistent interfaces between curricular content and the experiences children, their families and their community have. In order to achieve that, the curriculum must have the community and



the students' life stories as a theme (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, 2009; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010, 2013).

Clara (2014) reinforces that, in order to encourage and nurture the children's experiences in a school environment, the teacher must rely on an ensemble of strategies and methods, like interviewing family members, studying the community, and using technologies such as video, photography etc. It is through those resources that Clara declares she reinvents Paulo Freire in her teaching proposal, when she seeks to enable the teacher to bring the children's reading of the world into the classroom, causing them to construct and share knowledge and articulate such constructions with the reading of words.

Multicultural education is living a new moment, with an emphasis on teacher training, because there is consensus between researchers and teachers that any changes in education must primarily go through an alteration in how the teachers perceive and understand the students, that is, the development of their criticality (BANKS, 1993, 2009; GRANT, 2008, 2014; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010; 2013). Consequently, when it comes to her work as an instructor, professor Clara clarifies the core of the teaching activities she has in one of her courses on multicultural education in the Master's programs at Teachers College: "The focus of 'The teaching of reading and writing in primary grades' course is on reading and writing within a literacy perspective, in which a large part of the course load concerns teachers practices" (CLARA, 2014). In order to achieve that, throughout the course, the students have contact with a group of children in the literacy process from a public school.

Each student "adopts" a child and, over 15 weekly encounters, guides and monitors, in the classroom, that child's reading and writing activities. To this end, children and their tutors (professor Clara's students) are assigned desks in the classroom. They begin the activity by diagnosing the children's reading and writing practices and, from the second week on, start elaborating a research activity around each child's life story, an action usually carried out through visiting their community and interviewing their family. This awareness is paramount to ensure teaching and school knowledge according to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995; 2009).

With the data, the teachers begin to assemble a curriculum, a program of reading and writing activities based on the experiences, facts and narratives they gathered from their students. This activity enables imprinting significant

learning to the literacy process, since it is based on the students' life stories and allows more tangible identification and meaning (FIALHO; MACHADO; SALES, 2014).

One example of an activity carried out in the classroom by the student-tutors based on gathered data is the children's name stories, when they seek to piece together with each of them the parents' motivation behind the name choice, the name meanings and its origin. According to Clara (2014), when the children find out that there is a story that is uniquely theirs and that the story facts can be narrated through their own writing and shared with their classmates, they feel appreciated and motivated to engage with the learning process.

At the end of her interview, professor Clara notes that, despite advancements in the teacher training field, changes in the school environment are gradual and have different impacts, depending on each teacher's motivations and life story. According to her, this education begins with the teacher's participation in workshops and/or graduate programs, continuing education courses, throughout the teacher's experiences in the classroom, as we can observe in the following accounts given by the basic education teachers.

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### **Evelyn: early childhood teacher**

Evelyn worked as an early childhood teacher at a school pedagogically and financially assisted by Teachers College. The school served a private public, mostly comprised of upper middle class families, but allocated some spots for lower income students, who were offered scholarships by the institution. At the time of this research, besides working as a teacher, Evelyn was a student at one of the Teachers College's doctorate programs on Education.

Describing her involvement with multicultural education, Evelyn mentions growing up in a politically progressive family environment as a decisive factor in her worldview and professional choices. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, her father was a Vietnam War veteran, an experience that would mark him and his family for life. Her paternal grandmother, a liberal, progressive woman, actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, so that Evelyn's father grew up in an environment that challenged the traditional, racist values of American society.





After returning from the War and getting involved in political protests and conflicts, her father and his family moved to Oakland city, California, in the same year Evelyn was born. Evelyn grew up in this urban center, close to San Francisco, a sort of Californian New York, inhabited by a multicultural population – Asian, African, Latinos etc. –, becoming, from an early age, as she notes, a person open to social and political causes of her time.

After high school, she enrolled in a graduation program focused on early childhood education, associated to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, considered one of the best basic training programs in the field in the United States. The program, according to Evelyn, was based on the classic cultural standards of the American white middle class, an aspect that caused her to constantly question the training's negative impacts on the education of children from poor families or ESL learners, children of immigrants and lower income families. That was the moment when Evelyn realized that her professional choice entailed a personal commitment to inclusive education proposals that accommodated minorities historically relegated to a secondary place in the formal education system.

After graduating, Evelyn worked for two years as a tutor for children in a literacy program at the library of the university from which she graduated. She then decided to experience life abroad and lived for four years in Vienna, Austria, where she worked with children as a private English teacher. After that, she moved back to her home country – taking root in San Francisco –, intending to continue her training as a teacher, more specifically as a student at the Teachers College's Master's in Early Childhood Education program. After securing a spot at that institution, she moved to New York, working as an early childhood teacher during the day.

She got her Master's degree and enrolled in the Teachers College Doctorate program four years later, staying in the same field, early childhood education. Although she already had a stance of combating manifestations of racial, social and cultural prejudice, she reports that "[...] the opportunity of taking courses on multicultural education had significant impact on my training" (EVELYN, 2015). According to her, the experiences in these courses enabled her to develop a more reflective perception of herself, concerning her life story, political positions and professional choices, as well as her own social privileges as a white person in a society overcome with inequality in opportunities and value judgments due to race, color, ethnicity, culture etc.

Another important point mentioned about her experience with multicultural education courses is the contact with readings and discussions concerning the concepts of curriculum and knowledge within an inclusive education perspective. When describing her experience as a Master's and Doctorate student at Teachers College, Evelyn highlights, as an important aspect, the teacher's positive and proactive attitude towards the student's learning processes, regardless of their social conditions and cultural background.

In that context, the courses question the relation between social conditions and opportunities and the students' academic performance, guiding the teacher to reflect on the prevailing curricular standard in the educational system, which rarely befits children's expectations and sociocultural reality. According to Evelyn, the teacher understands that "[...] learning problems don't lie in the child, but mainly in the school, which doesn't provide alternatives to communicate with the students' cultural and social diversity" (EVELYN, 2015).

Reflecting on that, Evelyn reports a situation she lived at a conventional continuing education program, which emphasized empowering the teacher to work with compensatory education proposals aimed at students who were children of immigrants and had learning difficulties with English. For the course instructor, learning difficulties in these public school students from immigrant families stemmed from their families' and communities' inability to position themselves as speakers of the English language, leaving it up to the school and teachers to "fix" these learning adversities through school tutoring activities.

We can observe that the responsibility for the child's education didn't belong with the student or the family, but the professionals and the school's pedagogical structure, which were supposed to encompass the learners' different needs. Considering the diversities, bringing them up, appreciating them and intervening assertively in plurality are essential principles for a Critical and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (BANKS, 1999; GRANT, 2008; LADSON-BILLINGS, 1995, 2009; SOUTO-MANNING, 2010, 2013; WILLIS; LEWIS, 1998).

Another interesting aspect of multicultural education that Evelyn mentioned concerns the concept of curriculum. She observes that multicultural education courses work with the idea of a creative curriculum, demanding that teachers get to know students and their families and insert other themes, languages and dialects in the classroom, according to each reality. She also infers her own limitations and says that, although she doesn't speak another language, she tries



to position herself as a listener and learner of other languages, trying to establish basic and fundamental communication with students from immigrant families based on their mother tongue. In her own words: “Every year I try to learn a few words in other languages, because I think it is a way to show kids and their families that they are welcome” (EVELYN, 2015).

Evelyn severely criticizes the traditional multicultural education approach that she claims to be predominant in schools and teacher training courses, which she calls “touristic multicultural education approach”, because, besides the limited understanding of multicultural education as restricted to teaching cultural manifestations, parties and holidays, it has as its most harmful factor the romanticized idea of the child that is predominant among teachers. She observes that this traditional approach usually considers the child as a sweet, innocent and naïve creature, as a subject that:

[...] needs to be protected from the evils of the adult world, as if the child weren't able to notice the bad things they experience every day, like the manifestations of exclusion and prejudices in their social and school environment (EVELYN, 2015).

We observe that Evelyn agrees with Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009) and Souto-Manning (2010; 2013) when she criticizes meritocratic multicultural education approaches, as well as those that tend to handle students' learning difficulties superficially, without considering political and structural aspects that permeate social exclusion processes.

Lastly, Evelyn highlights the difficulty inherent to the teacher's work within a critical multicultural education perspective, since, although she attended training within progressive educational premises, in her experience as a teacher, she realized that attitude changes don't happen immediately, requiring, from the teacher, experiences and maturity in the education field. In that sense, Evelyn defines multicultural education as something beyond an academic qualification, because it represents a way for teachers to position themselves before the other and the world, an attitude that transcends the school space, that is, “[...] it's like I say: maybe multicultural education is more related to an ideology, a critical standard, than to specific teaching activities” (EVELYN, 2015).

Evelyn understands that the educational proposal needs to consider the cultural identities of students and teachers as cultural subjects in a plural society that has unequal opportunities. Beyond that, it is important that the teacher can

articulate theory and practice in order to generate social change through the actions of involved parties, students and teachers, responsible for the improvement in education and life, especially for students from underprivileged social classes, as taught by Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009).

## **Rosie: primary school teacher**

Rosie was a primary school teacher at a public school in New York City. Besides being a basic education teacher, she was professor Clara's assistant at Teacher College, in a multicultural education course.

Rosie's story, as the daughter of Puerto Rican parents who moved to the United States in the 1960s, illustrates the sociocultural challenges faced by families that immigrate seeking better life conditions in a developed country (MENDES, 2013). Her family was very poor. In that context, the dream of a promising America, with job opportunities and quality education for their children, motivated them to move to the United States. At first, they lived in New York City, where Rosie was born. At the time, her mother was only 16 years old and, after the family settled in the city, enrolled in high school, quickly learning English.

Her father was older, 30 years old, had difficulty with the new language, which caused his teachers to consider him restricted, and dropped out of school. His situation as an immigrant who didn't have his culture appreciated as well as the experience of school exclusion in the 1960s were, for Rosie, motivations to approach the critical multicultural education based on the teachings of Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009) and Souto-Manning (2010; 2013).

Rosie's parents got divorced when she was little, and her father moved to Ohio. Her mother stayed in New York after the divorce and, after graduating high school, soon started working, a time when Rosie, a child that needed to be looked after, went to live with her maternal grandmother.

It is important to note that Rosie's grandmother didn't speak English, so her communication at home was always in Spanish. When Rosie started school, in early childhood education (preschool), she had forgotten English. Her first teacher frequently highlighted her learning difficulties and stated that she wouldn't learn English if she continued to talk to her grandmother in Spanish, at home. On one occasion, that teacher scheduled a meeting with the grandmother at school and asked her to no longer talk to Rosie in Spanish. Faced with



the teacher's arguments, the grandmother avoided Spanish at home; without English, they started living a life of silence, according to Rosie: "At the time, I was 6 years old and it was really complicated, because we were very close and that situation created a barrier between us" (ROSIE, 2015).

Rosie started to forget Spanish as she learned English, to the point that she practically unlearned her mother tongue. This situation worsened when, in 9th grade (high school), she was transferred to another school, a catholic institution attended by students from families of diverse ethnicities, such as Irish, Italian, African American, and a small group of Latinas. Because of her life story, coming from a family of poor Latino immigrants and raised by a grandmother who barely spoke English, she started to feel distant and below her classmates' lifestyle. Experience with that reality caused her to despise her own social and ethnic identities and disbelieve her learning capabilities, as she reports: "I had lost a lot of my Spanish, because back then I was ashamed of speaking Spanish. I felt stigmatized and I wanted to be American [...]" (ROSIE, 2015)

After graduating high school, she went on to higher education, enrolling in a college attended by a very diverse student body, where there was a group of Latino students who, unlike her, had a strong sense of pride towards their ethnic-cultural identity. Coming from Ecuador, Dominican Republic, among other nationalities, these students, besides English, talked and communicated perfectly in Spanish. Although they were a quantitative minority, "[...] they were very proud of their origins, [...]; they loved being what they were" (ROSIE, 2015).

Rosie infers that she lived through a profound identity crisis, which made her reflect on the negative feelings she had cultivated so far towards her cultural origins. She explains: "That minute, I started thinking about myself, about how much I denied my identity [...]". Immersed in existential drama, her first attitude was to start a Spanish course, because, like her Latino classmates, she "[...] wished to read and write in Spanish in the best possible way!" (ROSIE, 2015).

Still at college, she decided to be a teacher dedicated to the first years of basic education (elementary school), to teach, preferably, children with life stories similar to her own. Rosie describes that moment in her life as an acknowledgement of herself and her identity. From that moment on, she was consciously invested in her academic path towards a critical multicultural education approach. However, Rosie asserts that although college encouraged her reconciliation with her identity, her initial tendency was to adopt the same

attitude as her preschool teacher. She thought it would be impossible for the children of immigrants to learn a second language if they continued to use their mother tongues at home.

She only achieved greater awareness and autonomy at her work when she attended a Master's program on bilingual education. After that formative experience, she discovered the importance of adapting the curriculum to the students' cultural diversity. About that, she comments: "I thought school was about learning the curriculum, but then I started to realize it wasn't enough and that, if I wanted to help my students, I had to discuss these issues in the classroom" (ROSIE, 2015).

Besides the reflective exercise brought about by bilingual education with a multicultural point of view, there was another decisive factor for her critical attitude as a teacher. When she married a Black Puerto Rican, Rosie started to notice, in an even more visible and painful way, the hardships of inequality and racial prejudice, especially when she had her only son and faced symptomatic episodes of that context. Her husband even said he'd rather have had a girl instead of a boy, because he believed that dark-skinned boys, in the American society, tend to have more problems than girls. Portes, Haller e Fernández-Kelly (2008, p. 13) agree with that idea when they discuss the adaptation barriers faced by immigrant second-generation youth in today's America and what social and economic resources they and their families have to confront them, especially concerning Black people.

Rosie reports that, with marriage and motherhood, she started to be more conscious of her own privilege as a light-skinned person, even if she was the daughter of immigrants. Besides being light-skinned, she'd had the opportunity to attend private school from a young age, through scholarships, and learned to speak English as a young child, which made her more familiar with the language, resulting in more study and job opportunities.

On the other hand, young people from working-class immigrant families that don't have strong community support may experience a dissonant acculturation, in which the introjection of the host society's values and language is followed by the rejection of those brought by their parents and associated to them (PORTES; HALLER; FERNÁNDEZ-KELLY, 2008, p. 19, our translation).



When questioned about how she acts in a multicultural curricular perspective, Rosie says that her first action is to get to know her students and their families, to then include in the curriculum their life stories, their parents' life stories, and their original country.

Rosie had to convince her school principal that her students needed not only to cultivate but also share their mother tongue and culture with their peers. Little by little, she gained the school board's trust, a process which was made easier by her students' good performance in school tests. However, in a multicultural education perspective, the manner of teaching gains significance, according to Ladson-Billings: "I don't think that methodology is a secondary matter. I am always thinking: 'how can I better express this idea, how to guide students to a new way of thinking?'" (GANDIN; DINIZ-PEREIRA; HYPOLITO, 2002, p. 288, our translation).

Rosie concludes by highlighting two aspects that are, in her opinion, essential to any teacher. The first is that the teacher should encourage the students to be proud of themselves and their history, and the second is connected to the confidence the students must have in their learning capability. To that end, the teachers must have autonomy and believe in what they do. According to her, "[...] it's no use being a hypocrite, telling a student that they can if you think you can't. It's as if you said that reading is important even though you never read a single book" (ROSIE, 2015).

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### **Sarah: secondary education teacher**

Sarah was a high school teacher in a public school in the periphery of New York attended by students from poor families, most of them African American, Latino, Caribbean, Puerto Rican etc. Unlike the other two basic education teachers, Sarah is from a middle class American family, born and raised in a New York suburb, eight hours away from Manhattan, inhabited predominantly by white Catholics. Although her father was Italian and her mother was Polish, she never felt different from most people who lived in her neighborhood and went to her school.

After graduating high school, Sarah enrolled in a college comprised mostly by a student body with ethnic-racial and social profiles different from hers, a situation that soon sparked her curiosity concerning her classmates. She

states that contact with a plural cultural environment encouraged her to build a new worldview, becoming, little by little, more critical towards conventional standards and values of the American society. "I found myself talking to the most diverse people, and that allowed me to build a new worldview. It was really interesting to me understanding how they saw the world [...]" (SARAH, 2014). In that context, she met her husband, a Black man from a Puerto Rican family, who helped her expand her view and be more attentive to ethnic-racial issues.

She majored in Journalism and started writing articles in the Education field, more specifically concerning school routine, the actors, the school-community relationship etc. At first, she worked in Rhode Island, portraying the academic experience of students from affluent communities, and later returned to the state of New York, more precisely to New Jersey, seeking new work perspectives. Contact with the public school universe in New Jersey, which served a considerable number of students from working class and immigrant families, in a reality diametrically opposed to what she experienced in Rhode Island, showed her how unprepared the institutions were to handle that student profile, most of them with difficulty learning English and low academic performance. School education should also be:

[...] responsible for helping individuals, regardless of their original linguistic groups, to understand that all human beings have the right to be validated and protected by their nations and, consequently, by all of its constituent groups (BARBOSA, 2013, p. 686, our translation).

In one of her articles about public schools in New Jersey, she met and started to keep track of the pedagogical practices of an early childhood teacher who managed to perform expressive work with her students and obtain good learning results. She soon noticed that the respectful way with which the teacher addressed the children and conducted pedagogical activities, always open to the students' cultural and social reality, was perceptibly distinct from other school experiences that she had witnessed as a journalist so far. As she built her professional history, Sarah realized she no longer wanted to pursue Journalism; she wanted to start teaching children with similar profiles and social contexts.

Then, she enrolled in a special teacher training program in New York City, aimed at professional who had already graduated and want to work in public schools. After the six-week program, Sarah started working as a high





school English teacher at an urban public school in New York attended by low-income students, most of who were on welfare.

She reports that her first experiences as a teacher were filled with anguish and distress. Besides her own inexperience, she had to deal with the students' low academic performance, a situation considered plausible in that school's reality. She tried to apply grammar exercises, but soon realized that they wouldn't work with her students and that it would be useless to bring to the classroom teaching procedures and contents that had nothing in common with her school's reality. She then understood that she had to get to know her students, their perceptions and worldviews, as well as their cultural and identity differences, as she notes: "I had a lot of African American students, but I started to realize that there were many Caribbean students and their realities were very different" (SARAH, 2014).

At the time, Sarah was already enrolled in the Teachers College Doctorate program and tried to attend multicultural education courses. She highlights the importance of the teacher's pedagogical actions in the perspective of culture relevant education studies, an essential experience for the construction of a more critical perception of the American school standards, guided by the concept of meritocracy and a structure of privileges that underlie school relations (FREITAS, 2012).

When she was asked to undertake a 12th grade class, the year when students take the SATs (Scholastic Assessment Test, which is similar to ENEM in Brazil), the exam that evaluates basic education learning and qualifies students to be accepted to higher education institutions, she realized how distant her students were from that reality. Many of them didn't even know what the SATs were, let alone the implications of the exam in their future study perspectives. In that scenario, Sarah began a systematic process to raise awareness and prepare the students for the exam.

One of the strategies Sarah used to prepare the students for the SATs was to make connections between the linguistic abilities the exam required and reading and writing practices the students usually experienced at home and within social groups, such as articles shared among them through the internet, radio or community newspapers. She observed that one of the most recurrent questions in the exam concerned identifying similar themes and problems in texts

of different genres. Thus, as the students brought texts to class, Sarah discussed the main problem and discursive structure of each piece of writing.

In order to foster an environment of interest and discussions, she created a virtual communication channel through Facebook and asked the students to post their arguments and opinions on articles and facts divulged in the group. She also asked them to share advertisements for jobs, classes and other community events in the classroom, in order for them to frequently position themselves as readers and text creators. Another strategy she employed was to post and discuss on Facebook and, later, in the classroom texts narrating the history of the Black movement and of important characters whose life paths were similar to theirs.

These activities brought new momentum to her classroom. She observed that students started to ask her for orientations on specific writing procedures, which were immediately shared among everyone, a fact which turned into more satisfying SAT results. Unlike most teachers, Sarah declares that she didn't demand from her students a performance above their academic realities. She adds: "Some colleagues assigned such difficult tasks that students lost interest and responded with productions below their actual capabilities" (SARAH, 2014). Besides criticizing this universalistic methodology, she also criticized the concept of meritocracy as an evaluation parameter of academic performance, arguing that there are unequal starting conditions, as taught by Wiederkehr, Bonnot, Krauth-Gruber and Darnon (2015).

When asked about repercussions of her work at the school, especially after obtaining good results in the SATs, the teacher answers that "[...] weirdly, no teachers, not even the principal, showed any curiosity about my teaching strategies" (SARAH, 2014). She believes that it reflects a defensive attitude in her colleagues, which is, according to her, common in her country's school environment. Besides having little support at the school, Sarah observes that she usually receives criticism from relatives and acquaintances for choosing to teach and, especially, for choosing a school in such an underprivileged community. Faced with the comments, she confesses to feeling very frustrated, because "[...] people don't even recognize [her] dedication and all the adversities. Social recognition moments are rare in this profession" (SARAH, 2014).

These reports concerning difficulties in changing pedagogical methodologies, neglect of students' individualities by the teachers, meritocratic logic



and social devaluation of the teacher's job were issues raised by Sarah since she contemplated the possibility of working with multicultural education based on authors such as Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) and Souto-Manning (2010, 2013).

## Discursive congruence

We demonstrated in the teachers' discourse that teacher training in multicultural education interferes with basic education teacher's practices, since the three curricular elements of the critical multicultural education proposal, defended by Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009), are present in the teachers' narratives: the teachers manifested the perception of themselves and their students as culturally located historical and social subjects; show appreciation and respect to the students' identities and cultural heritage; and have a critical view of the social structures that privilege some to the detriment of others, depicted mostly by recurrent criticism to the concept of meritocracy as the guiding principle for academic performance and school relations (WIEDERKEHR; BONNOT; KRAUTH-GRUBER; DARNON, 2015).

The researched teachers' commitment to an inclusive multicultural education proposal is something that precedes a continuing education moment, and is connected to a life path marked by experiencing and questioning situations of injustice and social inequality, whether directly experienced by the teachers or indirectly, through people close to them. Before enrolling in a multicultural education program, all teachers researched had already made professional choices that demanded sensitivity and commitment to the rights and causes of minority groups. Even the choice for teaching and for public schools is shown in their discourse as linked to a desire to work for the improvement of education and inclusion of underprivileged social and cultural groups.

By understanding students as historical and social subjects permeated by subjectivities and individualities which are not generalizable (BARBOSA, 2013), the teachers managed to visualize migratory flows and appreciate and respect their students' identities and cultures with a critical look pertaining the social structure of privilege and discrimination, which enabled the creation of methodologies different from traditional ones, meritocratic and universalizing.

The teachers' pedagogical practices, like the one defended by Ladson-Billings (2014), were modified in order to fit into a multicultural education, which doesn't just account for differences, but also values plurality, aiming to make sure knowledge is significant and contextualized for the students and breaking the paradigm that literacy in another language would be a hindrance to English learning.

Despite the accomplishments and advancements obtained in the context of teacher training within a multicultural educational perspective, the teachers observe that changes in the school environment, according to Clara – lecturer from Teachers College –, are always gradual and their impacts are unequal, depending on each teacher's motivations and life story. Respecting mother tongues and understanding that global citizenship doesn't entail the invisibility of cultural identities were driving factors for the creation of inclusive practices in a multicultural perspective (BARBOSA, 2013). However, although these practices are recognized for improving students' learning, they didn't result in significant changes in the methodologies of nearby teachers, illustrating a more individual work with little collective acceptance and adherence.

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## Final considerations

In this article, we discussed teacher training and pedagogical practices within a critical multicultural education approach, more specifically the perception of teachers who experienced a multicultural education proposal, referenced in the studies by Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009) and Souto-Manning (2010; 2013), among others, directed at the teachers' training. We questioned how teacher training is developed aiming to encourage multicultural educational practices in basic education. In summation, we aim to understand the construction of American basic education teachers' academic education to develop multicultural attitudes and practices in a school context.

The results showed that teachers who had the opportunity to take part in programs that emphasized multicultural education adopted inclusive attitudes based on Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009), among other authors, since their approach: considered students' life stories and cultural identities; questioned traditional curricular knowledge introduced at school from a neutral, hegemonic worldview; and considered and appreciated the diversity and uniqueness of



different social groups, questioning how ethnic-racial relations were structured in society and in the school context. Although these elements can be identified in the teachers' discourse and pedagogical practices, we cannot assert that it stems solely from their training in multicultural education with a critical perspective.

Effectively, we can note that, more than a course in the multicultural education field, a life story marked by contact with social causes, conflicts and fights was the driving factor of the teachers' educational qualification in an inclusive and critical education perspective. In other words, critical multicultural education represented first a political and ideological movement, a clear option in favor of minority and socially disadvantaged groups, and teacher training is one of its political action strategies. After all, the teachers were motivated to enroll in critical multicultural courses by their experiences with exclusion, discrimination or invisibility of diverse cultural issues in their family or in their professions.

This observation recognizes the value in multicultural academic training in the teacher's pedagogical practice, because, besides enabling greater awareness of factors and problems that involve the accommodation of minorities in larger society and the teachers' self-reflection on their cultural and social place, with the acknowledgement of their own ethnic-racial identity, it also allows for teacher training within a critical perspective that contributes to the systematization of some inclusive pedagogical procedures, such as: the importance of the teacher's belief in the students' learning capabilities; knowing the students and building a curriculum based on their life stories and on their family histories; and developing teaching methodologies that encourage cooperative work between students in the classroom.

This research, although not generalizable due to its qualitative nature, not only allows us to deepen and spread the debate around educational work with diversities in a multicultural conception, but also occasions reflections concerning cultural and subjective aspects that permeate teaching and learning relations and processes, especially economic and ethnic-racial aspects, which can no longer be invisible in the school routine. However, we must remind teachers and other interested parties in formal education who defend eminently technical education and schools that changes and significant transformations are motivated mainly by desires, political commitment and ideals that overcome the neutrality discourse. Thus, we hope that this research can boost the academic community and other interested parties to reflect and develop other studies

that bring to light the importance of considering multicultural education in Brazil, an extremely plural and diverse country, expanding the debate to a national context.

## Notes

- 1 In an article published in 2014, titled "Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix", Ladson-Billings proposes a revision to the concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, aiming to grant a more fluid understanding to the concept of culture, in the sense of making it effectively committed to equity and justice issues.
- 2 Basic education in the United States is structured differently from Brazilian basic education: day-care and preschool correspond to early childhood education; kindergarten is part of elementary school and is aimed at children between 5 and 6 years old; middle school receives students between 11 and 13 years old; and high school lasts four years.

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