

“Me empresta o cor de pele ?”

A discussion about representation, language and power

Kerollyn Tuller Silva

Universidade de São Paulo

Ora, na medida em que nós negros estamos na lata de lixo da sociedade brasileira, pois assim o determina a lógica da dominação, caberia uma indagação via psicanálise. [...] Por que o negro é isso que a lógica da dominação tenta (e consegue muitas vezes, nós o sabemos) domesticar? [...] Exatamente porque temos sido falados, infantilizados [...], que neste trabalho assumimos nossa própria fala. Ou seja, o lixo vai falar, e numa boa. (GONZÁLEZ. 1984, p. 225.).

“I write from the periphery, not from the Centre”
(KILOMBA, 2010, p. 32)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter intends to develop a discussion caused by the question on the title, which I have been listening since my first year in a regular school, but only realized I could do something about it when I became a Teacher.

Therefore, first of all I would like to highlight some of the researchers and the ideas that helped me to build this discussion. Based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social political context” (VAN DIJK, 2015) we are going to show how something apparently so insignificant as a name for a pencil can impact on the way racism acts.

Still thinking on CDA and the awareness of the racism as a social practice and ideology manifested through discourse (WODAK, REISIGL, 2015) we can say that analyzing how those racists ideas are produced and reproduced could serve as a tool to destroy it.

Even though we know “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (LORDE, 1984) we could think that if the margin takes power of the rules, pervert them and use as a weapon to fight oppression (FOUCAULT, 1979) this could be a way to fight a system of oppression.

Not only analyzing but most importantly speaking for ourselves, we are not trying to be “as good as a white hegemonical researcher”. A researcher from the margin, I can speak for myself, wants to be as good as a good researcher. I am not interested to look like the master, even if we are studying on the same library, even if geographically speaking we are closer now, I will always speak from the periphery. And I, the *neguinha*, I will speak.

By taking of my *mask of speechlessness*, I am able to define myself, my ideas, my social practices and release “my mouth”, the mouth here not only as a biological part of a human being, but also as a symbol of speech and enunciation, because the mouth “Within racism it becomes the organ of oppression par excellence; it represents the organ whites want – and need - to control.” (KILOMBA, 2010)

The researcher is also a teacher, this work it is not only about me and a solo self-discovery journey, but mostly how I used my journey to reflect about my work and the impact of every lexical choice I do while teaching.

Listening to “me empresta o cor de pele?” so many times caused me a discomfort, but seeing on my work the consequences of this “inoffensive name” brought me here, to research, to question, to bother and disturb.

The following text is a result of my participation on the project “O desafio do ensino da leitura e da escrita: o manejo da heterogeneidade nas salas do 1º ano do Ensino Fundamental” where I had the privilege to work as a researcher and a teacher, my graduation readings with the life changing subject “Discourse Analysis” and others personal researches. And now I “personally” invite the reader to talk and discuss with me and inspired by my mentor on a translanguage¹ way of thinking.

The skin color pencil

Every time a student asks me the “skin color pencil” I give them the brown one, they correct me, of course. From this we can say that whenever one of my student’s name one specific shade of pink as the “skin color pencil” it is possible to see how the sign is ideological and the meaning behind this, even if they are not conscious about it.

As mentioned before, this name always caused me a discomfort, I was not totally conscious about the origin on this feeling until I became a teacher, until I became a researcher.

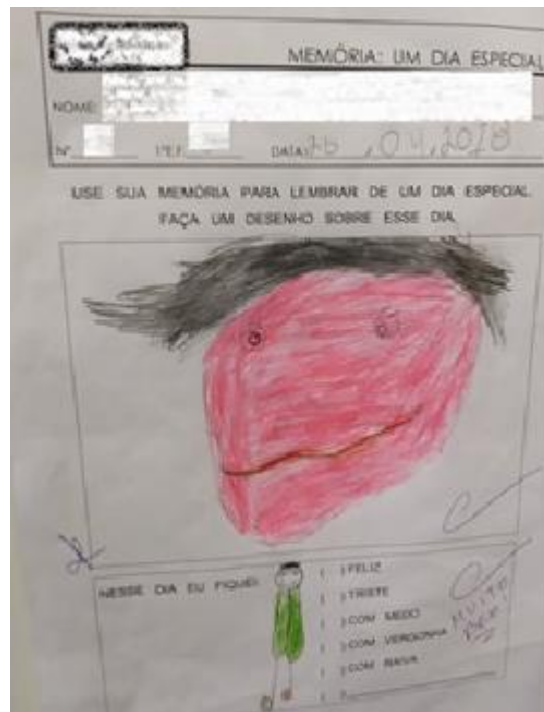
One of my functions as a researcher and teacher on the project mentioned before was to work specifically with students who were struggling with the literacy process, my work was to find something they loved and use this as tool for education.

On that work I had a student that completely changed my life, and everything I knew about me, education, race and teaching. I will introduce now J., first on a distant “technical” way, then I will talk about a seven-year-old black boy who taught me a lot.

J. in the initial evaluations was able to spell only vowels, still without reading simple or complex words. The student demonstrated poorly directed affection, expressed many of his emotions with aggressive postures and showed difficulty in establishing dialogue for the solution of conflicts, usually does not accept or understand the requests of adults, however, does not demonstrate unavailability for activities and performs them with zeal.

Often he used untruths to justify his actions or to blame colleagues, and in many situations of conflict he behaves as a spectator, even when his participation is evident. However, he often shows his affection, is very participative, although in these participations he often appropriates the experiences of his colleagues, which do not necessarily coincide with his reality.

That being said, we decided to work on the construction of identity and the psychological subjectivity through stories that approach his life. After seeing this image, I was sure we had to work on racial representation, the following drawing is a self-portrait of a seven-year-old black boy, about a special day on his life;



I was shocked, indeed, but not surprised, I use to draw myself as a blond blue-eyed girl for a long time. Of course, the experiences with structural racism are individual, however, to be aware about how the oppression shows “her face” was essential to work with this delicate topic.

Not only because I am a black woman, but because I am conscious about racism. If we observe closer, it is not exactly the shade of pink that some Brazilian kids named “skin color pencil”, but it is a shade of pink. Not brown, not yellow, pink.

It is necessary to understand the language as a social phenomenon, and also realize that there is no neutral language the world does not speak its own meanings, but can only be translated by means of a socially marked language. If we had a neutral language, my student would not color himself with pink.

J. grew up listening that a specific shade of pink was the “skin color pencil”, without mentioning of course the lack of positive representation of black people on mass media. Nobody needs to tell him he is on the margin, it is not necessary to explain how far from the standard he is, we know.

Baring this on my mind at the time and now reflecting with the “danger of the single story”² and the study of the importance narratives based on Aparecida de Jesus Ferreira (2015) based on Critical Race Theory, and also on Van Dijk who affirms that

Se o racismo é reproduzido através do discurso e comunicação, nós podemos esperar também que seja o caso das histórias e o contar histórias nas conversas diárias, conversas institucionais, e nas narrativas de novelas, filmes, como as estórias contadas pelos meios de comunicação em forma de notícia (VAN DIJK, 1993, p.123)

The chosen tool for helping J. to develop his reading and writing and to build his identity was to find a story about a boy that looked like him. Self-esteem it is not a superficial thing, it is not only about the idea of beauty. But a whole complex set of ideas and practices that impacts on the way people live by.

How someone could do something positive and have a growth mindset if they carry a “sentimento constante de dorção e não pertencimento pautado pela estética que aponta a ausência de beleza e, portanto, de qualidades humanas louváveis?” (BERTH, 2018)

From this on I started to research about stories J. could enjoy, and realized that a black boy as a protagonist it is not something so easy to find, I was lucky to have an amazing team and from this team I was introduced to “*Jeremias*”³. A comic about the almost forgotten boy from “Turma da Mônica” created by Maurício de Souza, but with a deeper story developed later by Rafael Calça and Jefferson Costa.

After our first reading I noticed the enthusiasm of the student, at first I felt certain difficulty on telling it, my lack of experience in this format added to the art of the book (much more interesting than my reading at first) and the quick dispersion of J. to any other detail, were some of the factors.

But after the help from the amazing Pedagogue I was advised by, I could develop a narrative from the images and the lines on the comic book. I will expose some of the moments which were crucial for our work.

When Jeremias’s teacher gives the protagonist a job as a mason (page 22), J. shows indignation at the “*sarro*” of the personas, and explains to me that without masons we would not have houses, hospitals and schools, I demonstrate my intense agreement with his reflection.

² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – The danger of a single story

³ CALÇA, Rafael Graphic MSP: *Jeremias: pele /roteiro por Rafael Calça; arte por Jefferson Costa - 2018*

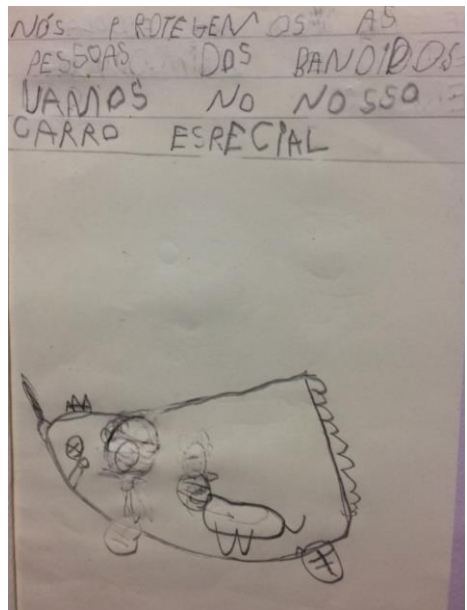
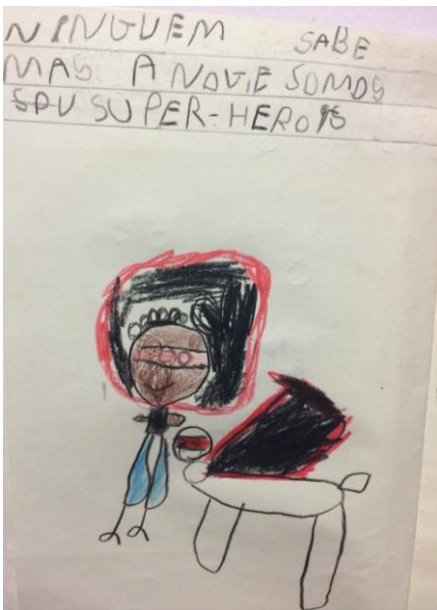
The student shows a lot of dislike of the antagonist who assumes racist positions, especially because they share the same name, he asks me to “ Agora muda os nomes prô, esse é o J., porque ele parece comigo, e esse outro chato é o Jeremias” I forget the change sometimes and J. reminds me “ Esse não é o J., o J. é esse que é marrom que nem eu” .

Even though I am a black person and therefore experiencing racism for more than twenty years as an object of oppression, I cannot simply give a ready idea to the student and hope that will solve all his problems. I try to distance myself from the proposal of a "educação bancária" that is

(baseada no pressuposto de que a memorização de informações e sua posterior regurgitação representam uma aquisição de conhecimentos que podem ser depositados, guardados e usados numa data futura) não me interessa (hooks, p.14)

It was a long and hard process, until one-day J. told me he wished he was born blond, because the blonds are the coolest, and the blonds are the heroes and blonds are the one with pretty girlfriends. It was the first time he expressed himself as black boy at school, from that I asked him “Mas e o Jeremias aqui? Ele não é legal?” and my answer was another question “E se fosse eu? Dá pra ser o mais legal da história mesmo não sendo loiro?”

From this I could offer him a chance to write his own story, about him, the way he wanted, as a tool to develop his literacy and also a positive identity. The student was not able to write yet so I offer myself as a helper for this. I will show now some pages of his book named “J. e seus amigos”, the student is responsible for the script and art, I am only the editor.





The author and the inspiration

Along the process I could understand that my job as a Teacher was not only to show letters, sounds and how they worked together to become words, but also “capacitar cidadãos para gerirem sua própria história” (PORT, 2017).

Especially when we talk about a black child who had questions with his identity and self-esteem, the teacher’s speech should always be aware of the impact caused on the students.

For example, when we call the pencil in a beige / pink shade of "skin color" we inform students that this is the correct skin pattern. It is obvious that none of the student identifies as pink or beige, however, we know the pattern nearest and farthest from this color.

The stereotypes involving black people in general are not positive, a heritage from slavery and colonialism. The history gave us many racists ideas and those are deeply rooted on the Brazilian society, it is not easy to be represented as a negative all the time, as Mano Brown from Racionais Mcs says on the ghetto anthem *Nego Drama* “Se ser preto é ruim, ir pra escola pra quê? Se meu instinto é ruim, eu não consigo aprender”. It is not only about language and names for a shade of pink, it is about power and representation.

By choosing not to call the beige or pink shade “skin color” pencil, I am not only changing a lexical choice, I am also fighting against racist ideas that insist on the

predominance and superiority of a skin tone. When I tell my students that there is not only one skin-colored pencil I also expose my worldview that involves the multiplicity of colors and cultures and not the overlap of one of them.

Conclusion

The process of literacy is shown as a way to empower children, this reflection was essential to understand the responsibility of all my movements in the classroom and to understand that throughout history, writing was connected to power. As Rute Baquero explains:

Nas civilizações antigas, os escribas detinham o poder da escrita pois o domínio dessa tecnologia era de conhecimento restrito. Esse poder os aproximava das classes dominantes (reis, faraós) que sancionavam as informações que deveriam ser registradas. Assim, poucos tinham o poder – a capacidade de fazer – este registro e, portanto de decifrá-lo. (BAQUERO, p. 174)

Taking back what was mentioned on the introduction, it is important for the margin to know how the system of oppression works, not to take place and become the oppressor but to pervert this system and destroy it, however to achieve this goal the education needs to be *libertadora*. (FREIRE, 1986)

Something so “insignificant” as the name we give for a specific shade of pink can expose a lot of how racism acts on the language, and the impact of this name on a black child was exposed.

Nevertheless, this is not only about the black kids, and black people in general, as a teacher I have already receive many gifts from my students, most of them love to draw and when the muse is “Teacher Tuller”, the drawing I receive is often colored with the same specific shade of pink. My students draw me, a black teacher, using the shade of pink we were discussing, and when I ask them why my skin is so different on the work of art they answer me “Porque é o cor de pele”.

With these students I was able to work in another way, on International Children’s book day I brought *Lara’s Black Dolls* by the author mentioned before Aparecida de Jesus Ferreira, a beautiful and delicate work which helped to start the topic.

Even if I am teaching a “hegemonic” language to privileged children I am a teacher from the margin, there is nothing that could change that. From this reading we could also use some of the activities and color the drawings based on how they looked, the discussion was very profitable.

The power of meaning impacts on every single person, if they are non-white they will understand that they are not the “right skin color” and if they are white, they

will understand, even if not consciously, that they are the one with the power to decide what a right shade of skin looks like.

That discussion was only possible to happen through the Critical Discourse Analysis way of thinking as Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271-80) summarized the main tenets of CDA, because racism is a social problem and a power relation manifested by Discourse.

It was also shown how ideological my work and research are, because honestly, neutrality is a myth (what a sad noun, I must say...) what we have to decide is if our ideological base is inclusive or a tool for the maintenance of hegemonic ideas (FREIRE, 1984).

And J.'s drawings were an important source because "CDA also focuses on how *discourse structures* influence mental representations" (VAN DIJK) a black boy was using a pink shade for a self-portrait, probably because he is listening since ever that there is one shade of pink named "skin color pencil". I have the same answer to my students who are totally capable to see me and still use the shade of pink mentioned.

That being said, discussing the name of a shade of pink through Critical Discourse Analyses can highlight how systems of oppression work. That was my try as someone from the margin, I tried to highlight a subtle detail on my everyday life and explain how racism is manifested discursively, and mostly how I decide to change this when I became a teacher.

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