

A NEW MILLENNIUM RESEARCH AGENDA IN BLACK EDUCATION
Some Points to Be Considered for Discussions and Decisions

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The initiative of the AERA Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE) to call together senior researchers and graduate students of African descent, in order to set up priorities in Black education research, teaching and militant activities, is very relevant not only for African Americans, but for Blacks all over the world. This was certainly the understanding of the organizers of the OnLine Research Training Institute—a professional development experience proposed for graduate students—in which I also participated when international researchers were invited to join them at the AERA 2000 annual meeting to bring the point of view of our country and region into the OnLine Institute. I participated as a visiting Faculty Mentor in the CORIBE Professional Development and Training Mini-course that the Commission on Research in Black Education presented at the AERA annual meeting in New Orleans (April 24, 2000). As an Afro Brazilian and a South American scholar, and as a participant in the International Research Group—Cultural Survivals and African Epistemology—led by Dr. Joyce E. King (AERA Invited Presidential Session, Montreal, 1999), I hope to contribute not only to the discussion but to the proposed politics to be implemented by research and teaching institutions, by communities, and by groups of the Black Movement.

Four commissioned research papers prepared by Michèle Foster, Kassie Freeman, Carol D. Lee, and William Watkins were used in the CORIBE Online Institute for graduate students. The contents of the commissioned papers show clearly that we, Black people, are still on the road to freedom. These papers demonstrate, although it was not the principal aim of our oppressors, that five centuries of enforced enslavement and colonialism did not extinguish definitively our African conceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. So the work of these scholars can empower the African community and strengthen the argument that it is from our African ethos, from our history on the continent and in the diaspora that we can present for the world our propositions for peace and happiness for all human beings. That means that to participate in the struggle for peace in the world, as UNESCO urges for year 2000, we need to continue to fight against racial privilege and for respect—to fight in order to assure our civil, social, and political rights.

These four very powerful texts furnish a diverse set of data and information that can be used to improve—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically—the research agenda as well as other kinds of initiatives in Black Education. In this sense, these research papers are contributing to the building of a rightful democratic place for this field of scientific, pedagogical, and political knowledge. In different ways these papers point out and directly discuss questions concerning Black Education in the context of:

- racial relations;

- scientific and political recognition of the knowledge produced in this field of research and pedagogical action;
- the examination and criticism of non-African theoretical approaches that are useful for understanding and explaining findings on and for Black Education;
- the human costs of an undemocratic racial education; and
- similarities and differences in conditions of education offered to Black people in different countries.

In the following paragraphs, I will point out aspects of these papers that I found very engaging in order to compare what these authors have presented with the social and cultural situation of Afro Brazilians and with research and pedagogical issues for Black people and on Black people in Brazil.

Before going further, it is necessary to explain that in our country Black Education is a subject that is discussed only within the milieu of the Black Movement. The principal reason for this situation certainly lies in the fact that Afro Brazilians are, for the most part, outside of schools physically and culturally. Just a few examples will serve to illustrate this point: no more than 3 percent of the youth between 18 and 24 years old are students in college (faculties); the curricula of (college) History and Literature courses neglect the history of Africa and African literature, even African literature in Portuguese, the language that we speak in Brazil. (Brazil is a former Portuguese colony.) Another reason that Black education is not a term that has wide currency in Brazil—that is not less important than the first example—is the belief, or perhaps the wish, which is widely disseminated throughout the society, that what we experience in Brazil is a racial democracy. This myth has been, if not created, then it has been strongly reinforced by the work of the internationally recognized Brazilian sociologist, Gilberto Freire (G. Freire, Casa Grande e Senzala). In spite of the results of research, done by Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes in the 1950's that was commissioned by UNESCO in order to understand how a racial democracy works—research which presented evidence that the so-called racial democracy was a sham—the myth persists.

It was only four years ago that the official curricula for primary and secondary schools began to include material on cultural pluralism. Now, although in a superficial manner, subjects on Black culture and history can be addressed in the school curriculum. The criticism offered by some Afro Brazilian scholars and groups within the Black Movement, however, is that the official material on cultural pluralism omits the actual racial problems in Brazil.

In order to fill this lack, works of Black scholars and graduate students are being published and disseminated, such as the book by Gonçalves and Gonçalves e Silva (1998) which examines different forms and contexts of multiculturalism; a book that was organized and edited by Munanga² which is in response to a request from the Ministry of Education—this book is composed of the work of eleven Black researchers and militants—as well as the series “Black Thoughts on Education”³ organized by the Black Studies Group from Florianópolis, in the state of Santa Catarina, a Black Movement group.

Finally, it is worth noting, even though the term Black Education is not used in Brazil, it is not possible to know exactly how many educational initiatives Black Movement groups have implemented since the abolition of slavery until today. Very well known are the formal and also the non-formal schools carried out by the “ãfoxés” in Bahia, like Ilê Ayê, Olodum, Araketu in Pará by CEDEMPA, in São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, and many other states by the Black

Pastoral Agents, by the Unified Black Movement in Goiás, Maranhão, and by the Union Movement of Black Consciousness. (The community-based activities of the Black Pastoral Agents are guided by the tenets of liberation theology.)

It is important also to point out that White people are very disturbed when they hear the term Black Education. On the one hand, they are concerned about not appearing to be racist, since for them “Black education” can be understood as “bad education,” as education that is not qualified, as education of low excellence. On the other hand, we Black people understand a kind of fear of losing space, privileges, control in their expressions of concern.

So when Dr. Watkins writes that in Africa, *“under colonialism the ruling regime needs education for obedience, docility and acceptance. The subject people want education for uplift. In post-colonial settings, regimes need education to centralize disparate peoples and to legitimize authority. Again the masses look to education for economic uplift and expanded participation in society”* (p. 3), his words describe, in another context and time, the educational situation of Blacks in Brazil, during slavery, after abolition, and today. As in Africa and elsewhere, opportunities for education for Black people, for the poor, and for other marginalized people, are guided by unequal power, discrimination, practices of violence, as well as social class and ethnic divisions. School equipment, furnishings, and buildings are inadequate and precarious and teachers are unable to deal with Black people’s ways of being, living, and thinking. The most frequently used teaching model is the “teacher’s talk and chalk” methodology. Textbooks, which *“represent portable knowledge and information”* (Watkins, p. 27) about Africa, which have been written taking into account only the Euro Brazilian point of view, do not include enough information concerning African and African Brazilian history and culture. In addition, these books usually are very expensive. Finally, school (formal) education helps to whiten the society, thereby alienating Black children and youth from the culture of their people, and this encourages the adult population, whether illiterate or not, to lose interest in their African roots.

It is certain that after five centuries of contact with African culture, Euro Brazilians have rewritten their way of being, of thinking, of producing their culture, having received influences from Africans and Afro Brazilians, just as their culture has influenced Black culture in Brazil. But very often Euro Brazilians do not recognize these influences; they just appropriate them and try to erase their actual roots. For example, during the most recent Carnival parade, a White musician commented, in an interview for television, that the Black musical instruments of the “samba schools” have been replaced by white instruments that are used for Portuguese rhythms. Now the music of the Carnival parade in Rio is changing from samba to “marchas” (a kind of rhythm that is close to military rhythms).

Research concerning the situation of Blacks in the educational system—entrance, permanence, conclusions—has been done, since the 1980’s, especially by White researchers e.g., Carlos Hasenbalg, Fúlvia Rosemberg, Nelson do Valle, and Luís Cláudio Barcelos). With regard to prejudice and discrimination against Black children, we can find studies done in the 1950’s, almost all of which were conceived and developed by White researchers (e.g., Amélia Bicudo; F. Fernandes). In the educational field, only in 1985 do we find the first thesis that addresses Black research questions, and it was presented by an Afro Brazilian male (Luis Alberto de Gonçalves); and in 1987, the first dissertation presented by a female (myself), also Afro Brazilian (Petronilha Beatriz Gonçalves e Silva). Today about 30 theses can be found, most of them conceived and developed by scholars of African descent.

Impressed by the very low level of interest of the educational system and educational researchers in questions regarding Black people and education, the Ford Foundation in Brazil decided with the Brazilian Educational Research and Graduate Studies Association and the non-governmental organization (NGO), Educative Action, to finance ten junior researchers who are studying Black education. The aim of this initiative is to increase interest in the field and to stimulate the organization of research in this area in faculties (colleges) and research centers.

This very brief summary of the status of Black Education in Brasil, that the paper by Dr. Watkins stimulated me to present, is intended to give an idea of the need for governmental, institutional, and community public policies regarding Black Education.

In addition, as Dr. Foster's paper suggests for the United States, in Brazil we also need to develop proposals and strategies to improve teacher preparation programs that are supported by the best practices for educating African descent populations. Likewise, research on Black teachers and other successful teachers of Black children must be improved (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gomes, 1995; Gonçalves e Silva, 1993). We need also to support studies of community-based non-formal education initiatives promoted by groups within the Black Movement and other studies that are concerned with, as Dr. Foster pointed out (Foster p. 10-11), how children of African descent grow and learn in particular settings. It is very important to demonstrate, with empirical data, *"how culture is or can be positively exploited in classroom and pedagogical practice"* (Foster, p. 14). We need to link the ways of teaching scientific content with our age-old struggle for liberation, creating a *"classroom that is safe, where students are respectful, respected, encouraged to take risks, free to fail but can only get better, and intellectually challenged"* (Foster, p. 27).

To accomplish such an agenda for change, a number of research questions need to be addressed. For example, how can we help teachers to improve their ability to teach Black students effectively--especially white teachers, who are the majority in Brazil? What kind of strategies must we create in order to motivate the teachers of teachers to include in their agenda of concerns racial questions and the obstacles that affect Blacks students' school achievement? What data and other elements we must put together in order to reconceptualize the meaning of educational excellence on our own terms? What must we do to persuade not only schools, but the entire society, that Black Education, as well as other questions concerning the well-being of Africans and African descended people, are very serious problems that involve all of the society? What kind of lessons can we include in the courses and seminars offered to teachers that can move them to fight together for Black people's human rights? What kinds of lessons will give them the necessary and appropriate information, methodologies, and attitudes to provide positive education for Black people and for White people that encourages them to be respectful toward Black people and our culture? ⁴

Considering the information and the data included in Dr. Freeman's paper, official educational policies, the ignorance of educators and researchers on education about Black peoples' perspective for life, our values, and culture, school curricula work to keep marginalized groups uneducated or undereducated (Freeman, pp. 6-7). By trying to make students who come with different traditions of learning, such as those rooted in our African heritage, conform to the requirements of a capitalist society, schools create cultural alienation, but fortunately resistance as well.

In his autobiography, entitled Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela (1994) says in Chapter 11 that schools have been designed to reduce the capabilities of Black people and to blunt the lives of Black people. That is why, he continues, each Black person is a political militant, even when he or she is not very conscious of that. It is very hard to accept that the experience lived by Mandela about 80 years ago is still very present in the lives of Black people, all over the world. This reinforces, from my point of view, the importance of undertaking comparative studies among Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, as Dr. Freeman's paper powerfully illustrates. Comparative studies are needed that focus on access and success in educational systems; on material, emotional, and symbolic support for learning; on African traditional styles of learning; on African educational thought; on strategies for creating and recreating their own culture under conditions of enslavement, colonialism, as well as all forms of oppressions and discrimination. It is also important to emphasize that the results of these studies must be disseminated widely within the society at large, after our careful analysis, interpretation, and our "translation" of the White language (or research discourse).

Dr. Lee's paper presents a substantive analysis of the state of knowledge about the education of African Americans. She analyses and criticizes mainstream Euro American [white] theories of education, rejecting what can be used against us and emphasizing what in those theories offers the best possibilities for understanding of human phenomena, learning, and teaching. She selects those theoretical approaches that are able to explain data concerning Black people, and she points out those that can not be helpful because they can contribute to the destruction of our identity, of our cultural referents. As the three other authors have also done, Dr. Lee dialogues with the mainstream literature of Euro American scholars but interprets this literature using African references as she identifies possibilities for discrimination or racial misunderstanding.

This approach suggests an important and relevant question to be considered in our research agenda: How can we best engage in a dialogue with white theories, while presenting on the same level the theories we are constructing from our African cultural point of view, from our experiences during centuries of being oppressed, but having also resisted oppression and the desire for our destruction? Another dimension of this question is that we need to discuss the concerns we have about the sources of our theoretical positions and references. Consequently, we need to decide how best to communicate these concerns, if they are to be understood by non-Blacks, without repeating or reproducing these shortcomings in our own analyses and proposals. This is not an easy task because, on the one hand, we have been educated professionally and scientifically trained within a white mind-set. On the other hand, White people, in most cases, will not give any consideration to what in their mind is classified as primitive, as a non-scientific culture. That is, our colleagues are often not open to dimensions of producing knowledge that are not their own. They will probably agree to try to understand our approach(es), only if there is something in it to benefit them.

In this sense, a very challenging question that we have to face is how to find strategies to have our scientific theories and research recognized by the scientific community. So we must find the right way to link our knowledge production to the mainstream White approach without being subsumed by it.

In closing these brief comments, I want strongly to note the relevance of the methodology of the OnLine course outline developed the AERA Commission on Research in Black Education for implementing the agenda we are constructing. I recommend the

implementation of a new course, including some Black graduate Black students from institutions on the continent and in the diaspora. It is up to the Commission to determine how many non-American African students can be incorporated in the program. It will be a very unique opportunity for exchanging ideas and information about similar and particular questions; it will be a great opportunity to define more precisely our needs for research and community action. This new course could be an occasion for the creation of international collaborative research groups and exchanges. A significant theme to be addressed in such a course is the links between research and militancy in our communities. Community Action as a field of study or as a context for research and ways of disseminating research results and applications is of prime importance.

In conclusion, I hope that as a result of our participation in the work of the AERA Commission on Research in Black Education and the AERA annual meeting, not only will we better understand our common needs and concerns but that we will also be able to implement the agenda we are trying to develop. We need to translate our ideas into a work plan, a calendar, and priorities.

Notes

1. Dr. Gonçalves e Silva teaches in the Department of Teaching Methodologies in the Federal University of São Carlos in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. She is a researcher of the African-Brazilian Studies Center at the same University. She has developed post-doctoral studies in the field of Theory of Education, at the University of South Africa, in Pretoria. Professor Silva is a militant of the Brazilian Black Movement.
2. Munaga, Kabengele, org. Superando o racismo na escola. Brasília, Ministério da Educação, 1999.
3. NEN. Org. Série Pensamentos Negros em Educação. Florianópolis, 1996-2000. 10 v.
4. An example of these courses and seminars is the one offered, since 1998, for teachers of public schools in the region of São Carlos, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, by the African Brazilian Studies Center of the Federal University of São Carlos.

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