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LAW 10.639/03 AND THE TEACHING OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Abstract

This article discusses some obstacles, dilemmas and challenges related to the application of Lei [Law] 10.639/03. To this end, it highlights some problems linked to how Afro-Brazilian history and culture have been approached in the education system; then, it recommends resources, strategies and measures that can be taken to solve the problems. Finally, it gives a brief overview of the 22 years that have elapsed since the law was enacted, sparking an unprecedented debate in the education system and resulting in advances in confronting epistemic racism and the coloniality of knowledge.

LAW NO. 10.639/2003 • HISTORY TEACHING • ETHNIC-RACIAL RELATIONS

A LEI 10.639/03 E O ENSINO DE HISTÓRIA E CULTURA AFRO-BRASILEIRA

Resumo

O artigo discute alguns obstáculos, dilemas e desafios relacionados à aplicação da Lei 10.639/03. Para tanto, destacam-se alguns problemas ligados à forma como a história e cultura afro-brasileira têm sido abordadas no sistema educacional; depois, indicam-se recursos, estratégias e medidas que poderiam ser tomadas no sentido de solucionar tais problemas. Por fim, faz-se um breve balanço dos 22 anos de vigência da lei, que tem provocado uma inédita arena de debates no sistema educacional e desembocado em avanços no enfrentamento do racismo epistêmico e da colonialidade do saber.

LEI N. 10.639/2003 • ENSINO DE HISTÓRIA • RELAÇÕES ÉTNICO-RACIAIS

LA LEY 10.639/03 Y LA ENSEÑANZA DE LA HISTORIA Y CULTURA AFROBRASILEÑAS

Resumen

El artículo discute algunos obstáculos, dilemas y desafíos conectados a la aplicación de la Lei [Ley] 10.639/03. Para ello se destacan algunos problemas vinculados a la forma en la que la historia y la cultura afrobrasileñas han sido abordadas en el sistema educativo; además, se indican recursos, estrategias y medidas que se podrán considerar a fin de solucionar tales problemas. Por fin, se efectúa un breve balance de los 22 años de vigencia de la ley, que ha provocado una inédita arena de debates en el sistema educativo y ha desembocado en avances en el sentido de enfrentar el racismo epistémico y el colonialismo del saber.

LEY N. 10.639/2003 • ENSEÑANZA DE HISTORIA • RELACIONES ÉTNICO-RACIALES

LA LOI 10.639/2003 ET L'ENSEIGNEMENT D'HISTOIRE ET CULTURE AFRO-BRÉSILIENNE

Résumé

Cet article débat quelques obstacles, enjeux et défis liés à l'application de la Lei [Loi] 10.639/03. Pour cela faire, sont mis en évidence quelques problèmes relatifs à la manière dont l'histoire et la culture afro-brésilienne sont travaillées au système d'éducation; ensuite sont signalées des démarches, des stratégies et des mesures qui peuvent être suivies dans le but de résoudre ces problèmes. Enfin, est présenté un bref bilan des 22 ans de l'application de la loi, qui produit une arène de débats inédite dans le système d'éducation et aboutit à des progrès en ce qui concerne l'affrontement du racisme épistémique et de la colonialité du savoir.

LOI N. 10.639/2003 • ENSEIGNEMENT D'HISTOIRE • RELATIONS ETHNO-RACIALES

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“Education was about the practice of freedom.”
bell hooks (1994, 2013)

ON JANUARY 9, 2003, BRAZILIAN PRESIDENT LUIZ INÁCIO LULA DA SILVA APPROVED Lei 10.639/03, making the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory in the nation’s schools. The following year, the Conselho Nacional de Educação [National Education Council] (CNE) approved, and the Ministério da Educação [Ministry of Education] (MEC) ratified the *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais para a educação das relações étnico-raciais e para o ensino de história e cultura afro-brasileira e africana* [National curricular guidelines for education on ethnic-racial relations and the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture] (Ministério da Educação [MEC], 2004).

The new law valorises the history of Africa, the struggles of Black people in Brazil, Black culture and the multi-racial and pluri-ethnic background of Brazilian society, recognising the leading role played by Black folk in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of Brazilian history. It determines that these subjects must be taught throughout the school curriculum, particularly in the fields of art education, literature and Brazilian history. It also includes November 20 in the school calendar as Dia Nacional da Consciência Negra [National Black Consciousness Day].¹ These decisions became effective in public and private elementary and secondary schools, noting that, in addition to ensuring the inclusion of Black people in schools, due recognition must be given to the experiences and culture of their people, seeking to redress historical damage to their identity and their rights (MEC, 2004).

Black activists have always considered education as an instrument for social awareness, advancement and inclusion (Gomes, 2017). They engaged in a long and hard-fought struggle to include specific content in school curricula to ensure that schools become a space for valorising diversity instead of discrimination. The new legal framework primarily resulted from pressure on Brazilian society put to bear by the Black movements during the re-democratization process that followed the end of the twenty-one-year military dictatorship in 1985, and the formation of a minimal consensus within the State and civil society regarding ethnic-racial inequities. Instead of viewing Brazil’s mixed-race culture as synonymous with an equally mixed-race Brazilian identity, without conflicts or hierarchies, the new law recognised the reality of racial discrimination, while advocating a new concept of Brazil: a multicultural nation made up of the sum the diverse cultural roots that make up a nationality (Domingues, 2009).

When it was enacted, some sectors of Brazilian society celebrated Lei 10.639, such as trade unions, human rights non-governmental organizations (NGO), progressive journalists, educators and social activists. After all, the law was not intended to divide the nation into culturally isolated groups but to educate people with a view to encouraging the different cultural traditions and practices present in Brazilian society to coexist, teaching tolerance and respect for diversity, whether it is cultural or ethnic-racial.

For the first time, this law made the schools a forum for the important debate on race relations in Brazil and the fight against racism, which has so often been silenced, downplayed or denied by the narratives that the country has always been racial democracy. Lei 10.639 and other

1 Translator’s note (T.N.): November 20, 1695 was the date when Zumbi, the last leader of Palmares, the largest *quilombo* (maroon community) in Brazil, died fighting the Portuguese colonists’ forces.

government policies adopted by the State and agencies of civil society have signalled that Brazilian society is increasingly aware of the problems facing the Black population. One of those problems lies precisely in the education system (Pereira, 2021), whether because the schools do not include debates about or confrontation with the problem of racism in their political-pedagogical projects, with most school curricula not covering the regional ethnic-racial specificities in this country, whether because some teachers still engage in discriminatory practices in the classroom, treating Black and non-Black students differently, or because some textbooks and other teaching materials continue to underestimate (or even suppress) Afro-Brazilian history and culture, sometimes reproducing negative clichés and stereotypes.

The aim of this paper is to address some of the obstacles, dilemmas, and challenges involved in the application of Lei 10.639. To this end, I will divide it into three sections. First, I point out some of the problems arising from the way Afro-Brazilian history and culture have been covered in the school system – ranging from the curriculum to teaching methods and including textbooks. Secondly, I suggest some resources, strategies, and measures that could resolve such distortions. Finally, I give a brief overview of the 22 years since the law was enacted, creating a unique forum for debate in the education system and leading to advances in confronting epistemic racism, the coloniality of knowledge, and ethnic-racial inequalities in Brazil. Naturally, a legal requirement alone does not guarantee it will be implemented. Instead, it is an agenda that is “capable of encompassing investments in basic and ongoing training, the allocation of financial resources, and the review of curricula and teaching materials” (Oliva & Conceição, 2023, p. 32, own translation).

Intersections, dilemmas and challenges

First, it should be said that in this article, the concept of race is understood as a social and historical construct produced by the advent of modern racism. (Black) culture is also viewed as a process, and collective identities as cultural constructs, and therefore historical and relational. Based on this presupposition, the first obstacle for the education system clearly involves epistemological connotation: addressing Afro-Brazilian history and culture from an essentialist perspective – that is, as immanent, fixed, and immutable realities that preceded the social processes into which they are inserted. This type of approach is problematic, because it could lead to a naturalization of ethnic-racial groups (Gilroy, 2002).

It is important to note that being Black in Brazil is not limited to physical appearance. It is also a political choice. Even so, from the historical perspective, it is impossible to establish a strict colour line between Blacks and Whites as if they were respectively descended from enslavers (Europeans) and enslaved people (Africans). Going beyond these two groups, there was once a practice of silence regarding colour, or of multiplying it into what amounts to a descriptive rainbow inherited from colonial times. In the Brazilian experience, Blacks and Whites are somewhat complicated historical constructs, and the line between them is porous and blurred. Therefore, it is a political option to combat racism when the law “refers to the Black/White dichotomy as if it were a permanent and immutable fact that is not subject to controversy in the nation’s prevailing social relations” (Abreu & Mattos, 2008, p. 11, own translation).

All this considered, the establishment and use of concepts – such as “Black”, “Afro-Brazilian” and “African” culture – must be problematized. Like all concepts, Martha Abreu and Hebe Mattos (2008) argue that they should be understood as categories that have been politically constructed

throughout history by intellectuals and social movements that brought them to light (or recreated them) and decided to make them fundamental. To affirm a “Black” and “African” culture in polar opposition to a “White” and “European” cultural standard is to neglect the extent to which these cultural identities are hybrid constructs – the result of processes of cultural exchange – and fields of dispute that are also historically dated, such as the very use of terms that refer to the concept of race (Abreu & Mattos, 2008, p. 13).

Stuart Hall addresses the impasse between Black identity and cultural essence. For Hall, that essentializing focus is problematic because it “naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic”. “The moment the signifier ‘black’ is torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorise, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct” (Hall, 2003, p. 345, own translation).

So, what should we do? How can we link policies to combat racism, especially in schools, without incurring cultural essentialisms? This is a burning challenge. As Hall (2003, p. 346, own translation) himself postulates, one solution might be to “give our undivided creative attention” to the diversity of Black experience rather than homogeneity, despite the clear differences in a range of Black experiences. Cultural practices associated with the Afro-Brazilian population are historical constructs and must therefore be socially contextualized.

Another problem facing the education system is the fact that the importance of “Black culture” is generally encapsulated, sometimes portrayed as a “contribution” instead of one of the “wombs” that gave birth to Brazil’s national identity and culture. Another stumbling block is that in some textbooks and teaching materials, expressions associated with “Black culture” – such as *congadas*, *maracatus*, *jongos*, *afoxés*, *maculelês*, *cacumbis*, etc. – are portrayed as folkloric, picturesque, and often referred to in the past tense. This view must be questioned. Although they were inherited from the colonial past in the context the Afro-diasporic experience, expressions of “Black culture” are very much alive, adaptable and dynamic, being reinvented, updated and resignified in each historical context.

Another problematic issue is the relative gap in the narratives about the trajectory of Afro-Brazilians. Some textbooks and schoolteachers report what happened to the Black population – synonymous with enslaved people – up to the day that slavery was officially abolished in Brazil, on May 13, 1888. Then, when they do not superficially address the post-Abolition period, they leap ahead to talk about the situation of Black people today. What happened to the Black population after May 14, 1888 from a social, political, cultural, and religious perspective? From 1888 to 2025, 137 years have passed and several studies have focussed on the experiences of the Black population during the post-Abolition period. This accumulated knowledge clashes with the sphere of education and teaching materials, although this situation has recently begun showing signs of change (Machado, 2016).

Addressing Afro-Brazilian histories in the post-Abolition context appropriated as curricular content in textbooks published after the enactment of Lei 10.639, Luciano Roza observes how this thematic field – which has broad ethical-political-cultural significance – has been developing through a variety of approaches, uses of the past and functions attributed to such content (Roza, 2014). Aglaene Mendonça (2020) observes how approaches to the post-Abolition period vary in each collection of textbooks according to their content. Some collections detail one theme to the detriment of others. However, absences, fragmentations and schematic portrayals

persist, contributing to the low visibility of Black protagonism, and possibly the crystallization of stereotypes. The big question Mendonça asks (2020, p. 120, own translation) is this: do the authors of textbook collections fail to consider the “possibilities of seeing the post-Abolition period in a macro dimension, constructed or referenced in a unit, chapter or theme?”. In any case, the post-Abolition period – with its chapters of protagonism, struggle and resistance – is considered a fundamental theme for shaping the positivised identity of the Black population.

Another problem for the education system is that some establishments undervalue the history of the Black population and Afro-Brazilian culture. For a long time, some schools and even teaching professionals failed to include this subject in their political-pedagogical projects or day-to-day practice. As a result, more than one generation of Brazilians has been taught not to cover such matters at all, as if sweeping an “imbroglio” under the carpet were a solution. It would be useful if, instead of opting for silence or omission, the schools and teachers chose to discuss the history of the Black population and Afro-Brazilian culture – as well as having access to this content, of course.

An additional thorny issue is that Brazilian historiography does not duly recognise the importance of the racial questions intersecting the lives, identities and trajectories of the subjects of *Clio*'s narratives. When describing some historical figures, there is no mention of their colour. For example, José Maurício Nunes Garcia (1767-1830) – one of the most important names in the history of music in Brazil and among the most important composers of his generation, who was even hyperbolically called the “Mozart of Rio de Janeiro” – was an African descent. Nilo Peçanha (1867-1924), a Rio de Janeiro politician who became president of Brazil between 1909 and 1910, had Afro-Brazilian roots. The King of Cangaço, Virgulino Ferreira Lampião (1898-1938) – whose ruthless gang of bandits scourged the northeastern backlands until his death, attacking, looting, and instilling fear among common-folk and powerful landowners alike – was a “mulatto”. Symptomatically, the racial identity of these and other historical figures has been mentioned euphemistically, if at all. The way to build plural, sensitive, multicultural and multifaceted historical knowledge is not by erasing the ethnic-racial differences and identities of these subjects but by recognising them.

Strategies, resources and possibilities

The main challenge is how to change this situation. It is not easy to think about of “how to do it” when the problem involves decades of ignorance and intellectual distance, not to mention the diversity of the teaching staff (and students) of public and private schools in the different regions and educational realities in a vast country like Brazil. Clearly, there is no magic formula. In fact, any proposal to change the education system with the aim of incorporating the history of the Black population and Afro-Brazilian culture must include the adoption of public policies. In this regard, the coalition of efforts around Lei 10.639, which introduced the mandatory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in all the nation's schools, and later, in 2008, the enactment of Lei n. 11.645, which added Indigenous history and culture to this mandatory teaching, was a major milestone.

Public administrators have finally realized that good will is not enough. It is essential for the State to intervene in Brazil's education system to make it more democratic and multicultural. Laws mobilize the agencies and agents responsible for their implementation. However, a decree

alone does not equip teachers to teach as intended. We know that, in Brazil, some laws succeed while others fail. I say this because, although it faces resistance from some segments, Lei 10.639 has succeeded, as far as possible, in an arena of disputes regarding educational projects.

The paths taken thus far have been varied and uneven (in time, pace and size). However, experts agree on advocating teaching practices and political-pedagogical projects based on the valorisation of “Black culture”, on the revision of the content of textbooks and supplementary teaching materials, on showing respect for Black students in the classroom, which includes curbing insults and derogatory nicknames – such as “monkey”, “charcoal”, “vulture”, “little black shepherd boy” or “*macumba* (“black magic”) sacrifice” –, politically incorrect jokes and pranks related to such students’ physical appearance – such the shape of their lips and noses, hair texture and skin colour – not to mention the discourses of intolerance towards religions of African origin (Santos, 2013). The support of the Secretarias de Educação [Education Departments] of the states and municipalities and the effective involvement of the school community are essential factors for such teaching practices and pedagogical projects to come about. Several educational experiences focussing on ethnic-racial diversity have emerged – or even coalesced (Andrade & Cerezer, 2023) – which leads us to believe that the current mobilization of the education system in favour of Black people’s rights is auspicious.

Any platform for change in education requires engaging the school community. Furthermore, teacher training programmes are needed. There are teachers who lack sufficient training to address the history of the Black population and ethnic-racial diversity satisfactorily in the classroom (Santos, 2013, p. 82). Hence the significance of the MEC initiative, implemented through the Secretaria de Educação Continuada, Alfabetização de Jovens e Adultos, Diversidade e Inclusão [Department of Continuing Education, Literacy of Youth and Adults, Diversity and Inclusion] (Secadi), and the Secretarias de Educação of several states and municipalities, to provide teacher training, improvement and specialization courses focussed on African, Afro-Brazilian and anti-racist themes as a result of Lei 10.639.

In fact, the MEC, the (municipal and state) Secretarias de Educação, the universities, in partnership with entities that defend the rights of the Black population,² cultural groups, teacher training institutes and study and research centres – such as the Núcleo de Estudos Afro-Brasileiros [Centre for Afro-Brazilian Studies] (NEAB) – have a twofold role: seeking contributions and exchange experiences for institutional plans, pedagogical guidelines and teaching projects, as well as organizing courses, workshops, extension projects, debate cycles and teacher training workshops in that field. Creativity is not enough; teachers must receive basic theoretical training to develop an innovative, anti-racist teaching practice that is in line with the aims of Lei 10.639.

Furthermore, the Eurocentric epistemological basis of the Brazilian curriculum has been questioned, based on Afro-centric and Black-centric decolonized histories. Schoolteachers gradually took the lead in reaching this epistemological inflection point, struggling to fill the gaps in their academic training and overcome the difficulties in accessing additional materials. Similarly, an epistemological renewal was observed in Federal and State universities,

2 As Nilma Gomes (2022, p. 27, own translation) asserts, the “Black Movement has effected and effects the intercultural translation of theories and critical interpretations carried out on racial issues in the academic field for the Black and poor population outside the university; joins forces with intellectuals committed to overcoming racism meetings, lectures, publications, mini-courses, workshops, extension projects, debate cycles, open to the community; [and] inspires, produces and helps to disseminate the most varied publications, pamphlets, folders, magazines, books, websites, YouTube channels, blogs, Facebook pages, albums, arts, literature and poetry, addressing racial issues in tune with the African diaspora”.

including an increased number of disciplines with African and Afro-Brazilian themes in several undergraduate courses, as well as holding competitive exams to select lecturers in African history (Oliva & Conceição, 2023, pp. 15-16).

However, simply training qualified teachers and future teachers to practice multiracial and multiethnic pedagogy is not enough. Developing teaching materials with an updated approach to teaching Afro-Brazilian history and culture is also recommended. Despite the discourse on the need to use a variety of sources in teaching, textbooks are the most widely used teaching materials used in the classrooms. Thus, any law that intends to incorporate new content or modify already established content should consider ways to make this information available in textbooks. “After all, they are the most easily accessible materials within the school context, so while the use of textbooks is not unanimous, they are still a reference material for teachers, parents and students” (Garrido, 2017, p. 11, own translation).

In any event, there is a discrepancy between what is produced in academia and what reaches students in the form of textbooks. There are elementary and high school teachers who disregard some of the new research and approaches on the history of slavery (whose experts currently focus on topics such as notions of freedom, citizenship and autonomy; negotiation and conflict relations; Afro-diasporic connections; slave families, agency networks, solidarity and comradeship; “Black religions”, urban slavery, the trajectory of freed-persons, free people and Africans; *quilombos* [maroon communities] and their present day remnants), the post-Abolition period, Black women, samba, capoeira, candomblé, and, in short, the protagonism of the “population of colour” in the economic, social, political, artistic-cultural and religious arenas.

To partially fill this gap between the domains of research and teaching through textbooks and supplementary teaching materials, in 2005 the Secadi-MEC itself launched a series of publications called the “Coleção Educação para Todos” [“Education for All Collection”], including works focussed on anti-racist education. Changes were also made to the official notices of the Programa Nacional do Livro e do Material Didático [National Program of Books and Teaching Materials] (PNLD) – the most important state policy for evaluating and distributing textbooks – which, as of 2008, began requiring content related to African and Afro-Brazilian history, overcoming the underrepresentation – better yet, omission – that had predominated on those subjects in elementary and high school history textbook collections (Roza, 2017). We should also mention the Programa Nacional Biblioteca da Escola [School Library National Program] (PNBE) and the initiatives of the Fundação Cultural Palmares, which have produced documentaries and books that discuss issues inherent to the “history of Black people in Brazil”, “Afro-Brazilian literature” and “culture from the Afro-Brazilian perspective”.

Furthermore, history teachers would gain in-depth knowledge by investing in a new perspective on the history of Brazil, underscoring the role of Africans and their descendants in the nation’s development. Some erroneous views of the Black population and Africa have been demystified. It is not advisable to naturalize the situation of Black people as slaves. Black people were not slaves, they were enslaved. Africa was not (and is not) a land of enslaved people. The numerous and diverse civilisations that arose on that continent had their own history, culture, political life, knowledge and technological skills. In fact, many of the technologies employed in Brazil, from cultivating sugar cane to mining, were introduced by Black people from Africa. Therefore, teachers should not reinforce the stereotype of a backward, primitive place inhabited by people at an inferior stage of human evolution (Souza, 2012, p. 23). Great kingdoms, such as Ancient Egypt, also emerged in Africa, which is a diverse and multifaceted continent.

It is important to problematize the idea of “enslaved people” or “Blacks” as victims. To counter the recurring images in some paintings by Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848) – enslaved people being whipped on the pillory, or beaten or punished, lying on the ground with their hands and feet bound – teachers are encouraged to present images and experiences that show Africans and their descendants as protagonists and active participants in history, despite being enslaved. For example, they could show the print by Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858) depicting capoeira or the watercolour by Debret portraying a woman selling cashew fruits.

Teachers could highlight the varied experiences of being “enslaved” or “Black”, allowing their students to learn about different life stories, family organizations, forms of sociability, and relationships (or not) with religion. This approach helps demonstrate the complexity of experiences that goes beyond the crystallized images of enslaved people as passive subjects. It is not recommended that teachers omit the atrocities related to the enslavement of Africans and the transatlantic slave trade, but they should go beyond discussing those experiences (Alberti, 2013). A good strategy is to highlight how Africans and their descendants resisted slavery in various ways (capoeira, cultural expressions, worship of African divinities, Black confraternities, purchasing manumission, escapes, infanticide, murders of overseers and masters, revolts, maroon communities, etc.).

About 5.5 million Africans were forcibly transported to Brazil, and it is estimated that over 660,000 died during the voyage. If those numbers are not adequately addressed, they could lose their significance. It is sometimes interesting to use individual cases to get an idea of the general focus: presenting biographies of Afro-Brazilian people without falling into the temptation of heroicizing them. This enables teachers to explore the different ways of being a Black person and dealing with the presence of racism in the different contexts of Brazilian history. What did it mean to be an educated Black person during slave times, as was the case of Francisco Montezuma? To what extent did being a freedman influence Luiz Gama’s political activities? What role did Black intellectuals and activists like Manuel Querino, José Correia Leite, Abdias Nascimento, Antonieta de Barros, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Solano Trindade, Lélia Gonzalez and Beatriz Nascimento play in the process of identity affirmation and the anti-racist struggles of the twentieth century? Because they are linked to lived experiences, such life stories can become an effective tool for addressing the issue of how the veiled racial prejudice in Brazilian society manifests itself and racializes a significant part of the population.

It is also essential to give students access to a variety of sources and materials that enable authentic reconstructions: letters, newspapers, maps, dictionaries, court records, photographs, literature, music, documentaries, artifacts and narratives of individual experiences (such as accounts by chroniclers and travellers). Teachers can also encourage students to interview Black people in the community, as oral tradition is an important source of information for reconstructing lived experiences, particularly among the lower classes and even the illiterate (Grinberg et al., 2019).

Individual cases brought to light by historical sources (written, oral, visual or audio), can help us understand events, trajectories and historical processes in all their complexity. The lived experiences of Black men and women show how these individuals overcame obstacles and restrictions to change and break with the paths and destinies society tried to impose on them, whether during slavery or after Abolition. Their experiences broadened and diversified the possibilities of life and culture.

When reporting on the post-Abolition period, it is important to deconstruct the reified view that portrays formerly enslaved people as synonymous with “criminals”, “illiterates”, “alienated”, “ignorants”, “vagrants”, “drunkards”, “prostitutes”, and so forth. Rather than being natural, such stigmatizations are social constructs. Recent studies have revealed aspects of the “crossroads of freedom”. Despite numerous difficulties and racial barriers, many Black people have sought to assert their role as full citizens in society, in the worlds of work, politics and the arts. Through individual or collective actions, they have created clubs, charitable associations, civic centres, literary associations, and newspapers and magazines – the so-called *Black press*. In the classroom, teachers must address the experience of these religious, recreational, cultural, educational and welfare associations of the Black community (Xavier, 2013).

Without going into too much detail, let us recall the Frente Negra Brasileira [Brazilian Black Front], founded in São Paulo in 1931, which became a political party and was dissolved along with other political organizations following the Estado Novo [New State] coup in 1937; the União dos Homens de Cor [Union of Men of Colour], which, although founded in Porto Alegre in the 1940s, spread to dozens of cities around the country; and the various organizations that emerged from the 1970s onwards, principally the Movimento Negro Unificado [Unified Black Movement], an organization that fought for Black people amid resistance to the twenty-one-year military regime that began in 1964, thus contributing to the country’s return to democratic rule. There is also the Coalização Negra por Direitos [Black Coalition for Rights], founded in São Paulo in 2019 with the aim of “fighting for a fair country with equal rights and opportunities”. It is a group of over 100 collectives and institutions of Black men and women from all parts of the country. In 2020, one of their main slogans was: “As long as there is racism, there will be no democracy!”.³

It is worth noting that Black associations – remnants of quilombos, Catholic brotherhoods and evangelical groups, clubs, cultural associations, artistic, educational and mutual aid groups – have multiplied in recent times, spreading throughout the country. When doing schoolwork in, say, local history, it would be useful to encourage students to visit such associations, which have contributed to building, systematizing and connecting emancipatory knowledge and understanding – and even develop teaching projects in partnership with them (Grinberg et al., 2019). Thus, “in a practical way, students can recognise which traditions and experiences have converged today to define the Black identity of the groups studied”. Furthermore, it presents the possibility of evaluating cultural creations – the intellectual, political and artistic production of “Afro-descendants beyond the period of struggle against slavery, a perspective that predominates in textbooks and in the teaching of history itself” (Abreu & Mattos, 2008, p. 15, own translation).

Another teaching strategy involves taking students to visit places of remembrance that memorialize African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil. A project organized by Hebe Mattos, Martha Abreu and Milton Guran produced an inventory of 100 places of remembrance (grouped under seven different themes related to the places of entry and fields of activity of Africans in Brazil: ports of arrival, sites where they were quarantined and sold; illegal landings; houses of worship, *terreiros* and *candomblés*; churches and confraternities; work and daily life; revolts and quilombos; intangible heritage), with precise documentary and bibliographic

3 Carta Proposta da Coalização Negra por Direitos [Black Coalition for Rights’ Proposal Letter]. Available at: <https://coalizaone-grapordireitos.org.br/sobre/>

references, throughout the country.⁴ This project was the starting point for activities in the field of historical research and teaching, heritage education and scientific publishing. As the authors of the project explain, they prioritized documentary, written and oral evidence of the historic and cultural presence of Africans to focus on the activities and legacy of recent arrivals. However, “we know the list would be endless if we had decided to add the Places of Remembrance of the descendants of Africans in Brazil” (Mattos et al., 2014, p. 260, own translation).

One of the places where it is possible to remember the arrival of first-generation Africans and identify the marks of their presence and intervention was the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, which gained visibility due to archaeological finds in the city centre. In 2017, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) recognised the Valongo Wharf archaeological site – the main port of arrival for enslaved Africans in Brazil and the Americas – as a World Heritage Site. The expedient of giving visibility to these themes through visits to places of remembrance not only establishes new forms of teaching and remembrance for “audiences that are unaware of or refuse to talk about this past but opens paths of sustainability for groups that suffer the weight of the stigma of being descendants of formerly enslaved people” (Mattos et al., 2014, p. 258, own translation).

Another teaching method is to bring Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions such as *congadas*, *moçambiques*, *taieiras*, São Gonçalo, “samba de roda”, capoeira groups and *maracatus* to the schools as ways of engaging in and living Black culture. However, there is a caveat: such expressions have historical backgrounds and require an appropriate time and place, and teachers can and should emphasize this to avoid freezing such manifestations in the work done in the classroom. Whenever possible, “such an approach can be carried out in partnership with groups and associations that develop these expressions today, so they are perceived as living cultural expressions linked to today’s political and social struggles and, therefore, subject to changing meanings over time” (Abreu & Mattos, 2008, p. 16, own translation).

From a different perspective, it makes sense to invest in history teaching devices related to Afrofuturism – the aesthetic-political movement of recreating the past, subverting the present and projecting a new, (re)imagined future (Freitas & Messias, 2018). Using media such as literary, film, photographic, pictorial and musical sources, Afrofuturism can awaken historical and ancestral consciousness, question the erasure of values and legacies of African origin, create conjectural narratives of Black protagonism, create racialized representations and delineate vast worlds of science fiction, historical existence and cultural resistance, conceiving the future on the basis of Afro-diasporic experiences.

Gamification can be a valuable educational tool for teaching content related to Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Video games offer a strategy for teaching history through play, effectively aiding in the development of knowledge about ethnic-racial diversity, Afrocentric

4 The “Inventário dos Lugares de Memória do Tráfico Atlântico de Escravos e da História dos Africanos Escravizados no Brasil” [“Inventory of Places of Memory of the Atlantic Slave Trade and of the History of Enslaved Africans in Brazil”] was part of a broader project, *The Slave Route*, created in 1993 on the occasion of the 27th General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), and officially launched in 1994, in the city of Ouidah, Benin, playing an important role in the recognition of slavery and the trafficking of enslaved Africans as “crimes against humanity” at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. The most important aims of *The Slave Route* project included the “bringing to light hidden histories”, focussing on the “construction of public memories and raising awareness among diverse audiences about the human tragedy of slavery and the slave trade”. By breaking the silence on the subject, the project aims to “intervene in the consequences imposed by these forced encounters, the source of cultural interactions and diversity of the societies that lived these histories and have now become multiethnic and multicultural societies” (Mattos et al., 2014, p. 256, own translation).

protagonism, and Black heritage. One example is the use of educational video games such as *Arokin: Desvendando reinos* [Arokin: Unveiling Kingdoms], which discusses and engages in dialogue with the history of Africa, more precisely that of the kingdom of Kongo (Barboza & Freire, 2023).

Introducing civic dates in the classroom that are related to the affirmation of Black consciousness and the fight against racism – May 13 (Dia Nacional de Denúncia contra o Racismo [National Denunciation of Racism Day]) and November 20 (Dia Nacional da Consciência Negra [National Black Consciousness Day]) – is another educational resource for working with Lei 10.639. However, regarding May 13, 1888 – the day when slavery was abolished in Brazil – considering this date to be a farce is an extremely controversial approach from an historical point of view, to say the least. In the late nineteenth century, May 13 was celebrated as an achievement by abolitionists, community and Black leaders and by the formerly enslaved themselves. Black associations officially celebrated the date for decades. To this day, some segments of the Black population – such as communities of descendants of slaves, Afro-Brazilian houses of worship and Black confraternities – still celebrate it.

One final guideline is worth noting: it calls for embedding Black history and ethnic-racial relations across the curriculum instead of restricting it to topics like slavery or dates like May 13 and November 20. The Black experience should be viewed as an integral part of Brazilian history, rather than a separate entity (Alberti, 2013).

The republican movements, which played a decisive role in overthrowing the monarchy in 1889, are generally associated with white people from the urban elite and middle classes, but this portrayal would become more diverse if the participation of Black people, the so-called “republicans of colour”, were recognised. The Constitutionalist Revolution, an armed movement that took place in São Paulo State in 1932 with the aim of overthrowing the provisional government of Getúlio Vargas and convening an Assembleia Nacional Constituinte [National Constitutional Convention] (ANC), received broad support from the population of São Paulo and intense engagement from the Black community. The volunteers, who took up arms, fought on the battle fronts and provided rearguard logistical support, included white people – native-born Brazilians and immigrants – and people of “colour”. This “segment of the population closed ranks in the Constitutionalist Army and even created the Black Legion, a military corps formed by ‘people of colour’” (Domingues, 2019, pp. 49-50, own translation).

In traditional historical narratives, the workers’ movements of the Primeira República [First Republic] (1889-1930) are associated with the participation of immigrants, who were largely responsible for introducing the organization of trade unions, class consciousness and revolutionary ideas to Brazil. This is a reductionist view that fails to encompass the diverse experiences that marked the leading figures in that story. Some labour leaders were Black and played an important role in organizing the union struggle. For example, Orêncio de Freitas (1891-1940) was the founder of the Partido Proletário do Rio de Janeiro [Proletarian Party of Rio de Janeiro]; Sebastião Luís Oliveira (1896) led the Sociedade de Resistência dos Trabalhadores em Trapiches de Café [Society for Resistance by Workers Coffee Warehouse Workers]; and Minervino de Oliveira – a communist who became president of the Centro dos Operários Marmoristas [Marble Workers’ Centre] – was the candidate chosen by the Partido Comunista do Brasil [Communist Party of Brazil] (PCB) to run for President of the Republic in 1929, becoming the first Black worker to run for the nation’s highest office. Therefore, it is important to weave Black experiences into the nation’s history and avoid confining them to separate niches.

Teachers should embrace the fight against Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism present in school curricula. Ultimately, Brazilian society should be committed to teaching Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the schools (Munanga, 2015). The presence of African cultural roots in our thinking, behaviour and religion is evidence of a civilizational legacy – certainly recreated, but living – that urgently needs recognition. We must rethink our own history (and identity), build references, recover memories and include new subjects. Learning from the perspective of diversity and multiculturalism will benefit all Brazilians. After all, racism is everyone’s problem, and directly or indirectly involves the entire nation.

By way of an assessment

Assessing Lei 10.639/03 in the context of our time requires considering it a founding instrument for subsequent legislation. The resulting laws and guidelines establish the frameworks for ethnic-racial education on that is committed to valorising and recognising Afro-Brazilian communities and overcoming racism in the schools. These include the *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais para a educação das relações étnico-raciais e para o ensino de história e cultura afro-brasileira e africana* [National Curricular Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture] (MEC, 2004); Lei n. 11.645/2008, which amends Lei 10.639, expanding its scope by making mandatory the teaching of indigenous history and culture; and the *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação Escolar Quilombola* [National Curricular Guidelines for Quilombola School Education], established by Parecer CNE/CEB n. 16/2012. However, this assessment of Lei 10.639 cannot be restricted to the formal aspects of the legislation. Furthermore, attention should be paid to its implementation and the varied ways in which the subjects have appropriated it. These appropriations have imbued it with meaning and significance over the past two decades, a process that has occurred across diverse and unequal times and paths, marked by advances and setbacks, achievements and ruptures that have not followed a linear progression.

The Lei 10.639 is still controversial. The difficulties are understandable, because ethnic-racial education is a thorny issue involving questions central to the construction of Brazilian nationality and identity regarding the ways in which the legacies of Africa and slavery left their marks (and engraved inscriptions).

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties and setbacks, themes related to Afro-Brazilian history and culture have gained ground and legitimacy in educators’ reflections and actions. This can be seen in the proliferation of teacher training courses on these subjects, through the production of teaching materials, hypermedia resources, the creation of websites, YouTube channels, blogs, podcasts, social media pages (such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok), the publication of books, articles in popular magazines and programmes linked to audiovisual media. There is an “interrelationship between the acceleration of communication technologies and the various new possibilities for producing struggle and disseminating the culture of anti-racist struggle” (Lima, 2024, p. 238, own translation).

In this atmosphere, special emphasis is placed on improving textbooks, regarding content recommended by the *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais para a educação das relações étnico-raciais* [National Curricular Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations], as well

as on updating and refreshing certain sections of those books, such as exercises, supplementary texts and image processing. Publishing firms have sought to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by this new trend – understood here as government programmes such as the PNLD and PNBE. The significant number of supplementary books discussing Africa and people of African descent published after Lei 10.639 serves as evidence of this.

This does not mean that we have overcome all the impasses, issues and challenges. Some of the teaching materials present problems regarding intellectual colonialism and the way the topics covered by the subject matter are presented. Teacher training courses also suffer from some pedagogical limitations. This situation is the result of decades of neglect, combined with the sudden valorisation of the subject without the proper allocation of resources and the demands not only of the schools but the market. However, this has been changing at a tortuous and uneven pace, in the 22 years that the law has been in force.

Even so, there is an urgent need to make progress towards producing quality teaching and learning on Afro-Brazilian history and culture. To this end, it is advisable to show effort and determination and bring research on the subject to the fore. These requirements cover all levels of education, because without adequate training and time for ongoing study, it is very difficult to be a dynamic, up-to-date teacher who not only can pass on correct information but is also able to capture their students' attention in a world increasingly permeated by interesting and absorbing sensory stimuli, especially in the digital era (Alberti, 2012).

Although it is hard stay up to date with long-explored topics, it is even harder when addressing sensitive issues (Souza, 2012, p. 19). Going beyond the educational process model that values the “single story” (Adichie, 2019) or just one form of knowledge, it is important to consider that teaching and learning involve the physical body, as well as intelligence, feelings, emotions and spirituality, in view of the possibilities and advantages of managing the intersectional perspective when decolonising the curriculum.

In any case, the presence of African cultural roots – certainly reworked and reinvented but still thriving in different ways – in our thinking, behaviour, ancestral heritage and religions constitutes evidence of a history that can be taught/learned through epistemic decentering. The long history of the Black population embedded in our development as a people and nation, and so clearly present in today's struggles, denotes the need to learn about it in order to recognise ourselves. These are burning questions that must be answered, and advances are being made in that direction in several parts of the country. After all, we are investing in studies about ourselves, in a still clumsily promoted field about our civilizational identity as Brazilians (Oliva & Conceição, 2024).

The Lei 10.639 reflects the possibility of political affirmation and social inclusion for a subaltern segment of the population. It was the result of a long struggle led by the Black movement, which, in its cultural grammar, “educates and re-educates society, the State and itself about race relations, racism and the African diaspora. And, if they are educators, they build pedagogies. And, if they build pedagogies, they intervene in educational processes and educational policies” (Gomes, 2022, p. 27, own translation). The fact is that the Black movement overcame deeply-rooted resistance in Brazilian society to achieve an important instrument on the path to building a more democratic and egalitarian nation in which differences in appearance and ancestry cannot be used as weapons to inferiorize and marginalize some segments of society (Domingues, 2009).

If the Black movement has played an educational and avant-garde role in this process (Gomes, 2017), it must be recognised that, historically, other groups have also been linked – by human sensitivity, political position, ethical-democratic awareness and/or official duty – to the debates and clashes in favour of the decolonization of school curricula and the inclusion of the Black population and historical agents who have been subalternised in the choices of content and subjects taught in the classrooms. Ultimately, all Brazilian society should be committed to this inclusion, which is a prerequisite for building an emancipatory educational project based on the postulates of epistemic decolonization, respect for cultural plurality and ethnic-racial diversity.

Understandably, the *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais para a educação das relações étnico-raciais* are guidelines intended not only for administrators of school systems and their supporting entities but for all members of the public who are committed to the education of Brazilians, as established in the Parecer do Conselho Nacional de Educação [Report of the National Education Council], with a view to “promoting the education of active and conscientious citizens within the multicultural and multi-ethnic society of Brazil, seeking positive ethnic-racial relations, towards the construction of a democratic nation” (MEC, 2004, p. 31, own translation).

However, a caveat is in order: the schools are precisely the environment in which new content may or may not be taught. Public policies that promote the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture therefore spark an emerging debate within the schools: “so that teachers comprehend the importance of teaching, understood as constituting identities, and receive the material and financial support required to make this teaching-learning process effective” (Garrido, 2017, p. 179, own translation). Pointing out that – based on their backgrounds, subjectivities, and formative and professional experience – teachers bear responsibility in the process of implementing Lei 10.639 does not minimize the central role of public policies, both in teacher training and the production of materials, in the provision of support and resources and the monitoring and inspection of the implementation of this law by federal, state and municipal authorities.

Some studies indicate that the impacts of the 22 period since Lei 10.639 came into effect are limited and contradictory within the sphere of primary and secondary education (Meinerz, 2017). However, it is always important to emphasize that, in a country marked by a history of exclusion of its Black population from fundamental rights, structural changes face resistance from individuals, groups and institutions, such as the schools. However, many other studies indicate that Lei 10.639 and all subsequent legislation have had an undeniable impact within the scope of the curricula prescribed and practised within basic and higher education, in the basic and ongoing training of teachers, in the “production, evaluation and use of teaching materials, and in the very form of production and dissemination of knowledge within universities, research centres, archives and museums” (Silva, 2023, p. 2, own translation).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that it is no longer plausible to think about Brazil without engaging in a broad public debate on issues related to racism and anti-racism. Lei 10.639 was a response, in the field of education, to the Afro-Brazilian community’s demand for affirmative action policies – that is, policies of reparations, recognition and appreciation of their history, culture and identity (Mattos et al., 2016). Through this legislation, we are countering the coloniality of being, power and knowledge, and reinforcing anti-racism as one of the main lines of the curricula.

From this standpoint, in the 22 years since its enactment, this normative instrument represents a significant democratic achievement that deserves recognition. Although the changes implemented to date are insufficient, they are underway within the education system's field for debate. The expansion or acceleration of those changes depends on the collaborative power and agency of the sectors involved.

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Data availability statement

The contents underlying the research text are contained in the article.

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