Article

Children's literature and self-recognition of black children: considerations about the book *The world in Tayó's black power*

Literatura infantil e autorreconhecimento de crianças negras: considerações sobre o livro O mundo no black power de Tayó

Literatura infantil y autorreconocimiento de niños negros: consideraciones sobre el libro El mundo en el black power de Tayó

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ABSTRACT

This article emphasizes the need for discussions about the books circulating among children in school environments, the importance of Black representation in children's literature, and the expansion of knowledge about works with Black protagonists that reclaim African ancestry. It highlights that schools also play a role in shaping individual identity. In this context, the relevance of selecting literary materials that enable meaningful work aimed at valuing and (re)acknowledging Black children is emphasized. Therefore, this article aims to promote reflection on the inclusion in classrooms of literature that addresses African heritage, fosters discussions on ethnic-racial relations, and enhances the sense of belonging among elementary school students.

Keywords: Children's Literature. Black Representation. Self-recognition.

RESUMO

O presente artigo ressalta a necessidade de discussões acerca dos livros que circulam entre as crianças no ambiente escolar, a importância da representatividade negra na literatura infantil, bem como da ampliação do conhecimento de obras com protagonismo negro que resgatam a ancestralidade africana, ao passo que a escola também atua na formação identitária do indivíduo. Nesse contexto, aponta-se a relevância de selecionar materiais literários que possibilitem a realização de um trabalho significativo de valorização e (re)conhecimento de crianças negras. Assim, este artigo pretende fomentar a reflexão acerca da inserção nas salas de aula de literaturas que abordam a africanidade, permitam debates sobre as relações étnico-raciais e o sentido de pertencimento de estudantes das séries iniciais.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Infantil. Representatividade Negra. Autorreconhecimento.

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo destaca la necesidad de discusiones sobre los libros que circulan entre los niños en el ambiente escolar, la importancia de la representatividad negra en la literatura infantil, así como la ampliación del conocimiento de obras con protagonismo negro que rescatan la ancestralidad africana, mientras la escuela también contribuye a la formación identitaria del individuo. En este contexto, se señala la relevancia de seleccionar materiales literarios que posibiliten la realización de un trabajo significativo de valorización y (re)conocimiento de niñas y niños negros. Por lo tanto, este artículo tiene como objetivo fomentar la reflexión sobre la inclusión en las aulas de literaturas que aborden la africanidad, permitan debates sobre las relaciones étnico-raciales y el sentido de pertenencia de los estudiantes de los primeros años.

Palabras clave: Literatura Infantil. Representatividad Negra. Auto-reconocimiento.

INTRODUCTION

Coloniality, as an extension of the civilizing project of modernity, is a historical and cultural phenomenon that originated in colonialism but has outlived it. In other words, even after the formal end of colonialism, it continues to sustain the logic of colonial power relations, defining knowledge systems and ways of life. Based on territorial, racial, epistemic, cultural, and gender hierarchies, coloniality produces subalternity and may overwhelm the knowledge, experiences, and modes of existence of those who have been historically exploited and dominated.

While marginalizing and silencing non-European modes of knowledge, coloniality has positioned Indigenous populations, African peoples, Muslims, and Jews as inferior within the human hierarchy. This reveals that the structure of power created during colonial expansion is centered on "race" or, more specifically, on the classification of the world's population through the concept of race, which was forged during the colonization of the Americas. Still deeply embedded in dominant global power structures, this colonial dynamic continues to reproduce and sustain systems of domination across various spheres of social life.

As a space of socialization, the school is essential in shaping individuals. However, it is important to recognize that the Brazilian educational system carries a colonial legacy, reflecting a Eurocentric model both in its structures and in its curricular content. This coloniality, manifested in the dimensions of being, knowledge, and power, remains present in schools, influencing students from their earliest years of education. In this matter, children are exposed to Eurocentric references, including those found in the children's literature available to them.

Therefore, by fostering reflection on the inclusion of literature that addresses African heritage and encourages discussions on ethnic-racial relations and Black children's sense of belonging, this article aims to highlight the potential for re-signifying racial identity among young students, in their first years of school. It also points out that not all children find it easy to identify with the literature targeted for them. Although Black representation has gained greater visibility in recent years, Black protagonists are still underrepresented in children's literature.

Thus, the article presents an analysis of *O Mundo no Black Power de Tayó*[1] (2013) by Kiusam de Oliveira as a valuable tool for fostering the recognition and appreciation of Black identity. In this book, the author conveys the joy and self-esteem of a Black girl who takes pride in her phenotypic

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1   The World in Tayó's Black Power.

features and ancestry, with illustrations that reinforce themes of empowerment and the beauty of curly hair. However, like many Black children, Tayó also encounters prejudice and discrimination in her school environment.

To support this discussion, the article draws on theoretical contributions from scholars who have studied this topic, as well as the concepts of coloniality of power, identity, and knowledge. This theoretical framework can help to reveal the close relationship between capitalist modernity and racism.

Additionally, this article highlights the impact of Black social movements in shaping legislation that mandates the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in Brazilian school curricula. It also examines the characteristics of children's literature since the 1970s, considering the Eurocentrism-antiracism-literature approach and the transformations in literary production following the growing demand for more diverse representation. Furthermore, it discusses the renewal of literary productions driven by this demand, which seeks to amplify the discourses and cultural expressions of social groups and oppressed populations on the continent, even after the end of colonization.

To fully grasp the challenges and significance of this representation, it is essential to examine the historical foundations of racism and its deep ties to capitalist modernity. The following section explores how racial hierarchies, established during colonial expansion, continue to shape social structures and cultural perceptions today.

CAPITALIST MODERNITY AND RACISM: COLONIALITY OF POWER, IDENTITY, AND KNOWLEDGE

Studies on racial inequality and discrimination have expanded in recent years, reinforcing the deep-rooted and structural nature of racism embedded in our historical trajectory. Although overlooked, this reality has been continuously denounced by Black movements since the mid-1970s. Episodes of violence and oppression against Black populations, both in Brazil and abroad, illustrate how these practices persist into the 21st century.

We live in a society where ethnic and racial diversity is a defining characteristic, yet racial inequality remains an undeniable reality. According to data from the United Nations, Black and Indigenous populations in Brazil are the most affected by these disparities. Furthermore, according to an assessment by the Labor Prosecutor's Office, although constitutionally protected, Black and Brown individuals face the greatest challenges due to discrimination, particularly in accessing higher-profile positions, receiving fair wages, advancing in their careers, and being subjected to workplace harassment (Boehm, 2017). As a result, they are disproportionately occupying lower-skilled jobs and earning lower salaries than white individuals for performing the same roles.

Although the latest census from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2022) indicates that more than 55% of the Brazilian population self-identifies as Black, including both Black and mixed-race individuals, this numerical majority does not translate into equitable access to public and private goods and services, such as formal education or, as previously mentioned, the labor market. Consequently, despite not being a numerical minority, Black Brazilians continue to be underrepresented in political and social spheres.

The various forms of racism trace back to the colonization of the Americas. Césaire (1978) explores this connection in *Discourse on Colonialism*, where he critically examines how colonialism institutionalized racial hierarchies and justified oppression through European superiority. In his work, Césaire asserts that colonization was a meticulously structured project, in which various social institutions, including medicine and religion, actively contributed to legitimizing European superiority and the perceived inferiority of other. Therefore, the subjugation, silencing, and dehumanization of Black populations are intrinsic to the very construction of capitalist modernity.

By establishing a connection between capitalist modernity and racism, Césaire (1978) highlights racial hierarchies, moral relativism, and the absence of a voice to break the silence defending the exploited peoples, as the elite occupations worked only for the well-being of the bourgeoisie. Thereby, modernity gave rise to a humanity reduced to monopolies, driven by the fundamental need for economic production, where the social group holding the privileges and power in a way that positions Europe as the great civilization, while non-white races are seen as inferior. Gomes (2001, p. 88) also points out that social relations occur through racialization. In the author's words:

> This constructed imaginary has legitimized racial theories disguised as scientific truths, which historically affirmed Black inferiority, the degeneration of mixed-race individuals, the idealization of whitening, the supposed primitiveness of Black culture, and the myth of racial democracy.

Moreover, by establishing a parallel between civic education, ethnicity, and race, Gomes adds that, in Brazil, being Black transcends biological factors. "It is a historical and political construction. Understanding how the issue of race was historically constituted in our country will help us grasp the complexity involved in the construction of Black and mixed-race Brazilians' racial identities" (Gomes, 2001, p. 91).

Still within the discussion of colonial relations and the consequences of racialist conceptions, Rossato and Gesser (2001, p. 11-12) reveal aspects of whiteness in the context of racial conflicts in studies of Brazilian and U.S. realities, questioning that:

> this experience is imposed in a society where being white is the "norm," it means that the hegemonically established notion associated whiteness with a privileged position that undermines the gravity of its own position and, thus, is unable to comprehend the experience of the "other." This quieted consciousness or white experience can be defined, according to McLaren (1998), as "a socio-historical form of consciousness" born from capitalist relations and colonial laws, today understood as "emerging relations between dominant and subordinate groups." This whiteness, as a generator of racial conflicts, marks ideological conceptions, social practices, and cultural formation, which are identified with and for whites as being "white" in nature and, consequently, socially hegemonic. (...) According to this, the experiences of other social groups (Blacks, mixed-race individuals in general, non-whites) are dehumanized and, as a result, are perceived as indicators of disarray within the context of humanity.

Fanon (2008), in his discussion of racism, points to skin color as the driving force that governs the destiny of Black individuals in society. He argues that it is the dominant class, the white race, which exerts significant influence across all social strata, as well as determines the direction of social and economic policies.

In his reflections on the coloniality of power, Quijano (2009) asserts that it is a specific element of the global capitalist power system, sustained by the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population. He also emphasizes that the Eurocentric perspective is not exclusive to Europeans or to the dominant powers of global capitalism, but also to those who are educated under its hegemony, that is a factor resulting from the long cognitive labor of naturalizing this relation of power. In this way, those who occupy the subaltern condition internalize and naturalize their socially assigned roles without questioning them.

Maldonado-Torres (2019) points out that the structures of domination established by colonialism left scars that transcend physical and economic boundaries, extending into fields

such as culture and thought. As a result, we encounter not only the coloniality of power but also the coloniality of knowledge and being as crucial components of modernity/coloniality, which suppressed the identity of colonized peoples to a state of subalternity, enduring even beyond the political end of colonial domination. "The subject, therefore, is a field of struggle and a space that must be controlled and dominated for the coherence of a given order and worldview to remain stable" (Maldonado-Torres, 2019, p. 43).

While the dimension of power refers to the control of the economy and authority relations, the dimension of knowledge extends to the control of knowledge and subjectivity, aiming to maintain economic, political, and cultural dominance. Thus, the hegemonic perspective of knowledge overshadows other perspectives, dismissing and colonizing them. The dimension of identity, in turn, involves the control of selfhood and everyday practices, subjugating the colonized and dismissing their culture as a means of erasing their very existence.

From this perspective, there is a deep connection between racial issues and capitalist modernity in the construction and perpetuation of racism. Racism cannot be viewed as an episodic phenomenon or an individual behavior but rather as a profound issue embedded in the social structure, affecting all dimensions of individual and collective life, placing Black subjects in the position of second-class citizens in the country.

Almeida (2019), a jurist, philosopher, member of the economic and political organization of society, and one of the greatest contemporary intellectuals, defends the central thesis that racism is always structural. He emphasizes that racial inequality stems from political, economic, legal, and even familial relationships that validate self-preservation among white people and the maintenance of privileges. Therefore, he underscores the importance of considering actions that facilitate profound changes in the social structure, as Black people continue to occupy subaltern positions in all spaces, whether due to the lack of rights or their supposed incapacity or incivility.

Reflecting on another perspective of the history of colonization, in which Black people were not viewed positively, allows for a better understanding of the construction of Eurocentrism, reflecting on the far-reaching consequences of colonialism that still persist in our society, and its deep connection with racism. It is also essential in the struggle against imposed hegemony. Therefore, it is relevant to give visibility to and empower the cultures marginalized and excluded by capitalist modernity, breaking free from the universe of prejudices and discrimination surrounding racial relations.

BLACK MOVEMENTS AND LAW NO. 10,639/2003

In Brazil, Law No. 10,639/2003 (Brasil, 2003) establishes the mandatory inclusion of discussions on the history and culture of African and Afro-Brazilian peoples within the school curriculum. However, this achievement did not happen overnight. It is the result of Black activism that, since the 1930s, has demanded greater representation for Afro-descendants. It also stems from the persistent efforts of Black social movements, which have engaged in dialogue and negotiations with different branches and organizations of the state at the municipal, state, and federal levels, particularly from the 1980s onward. So, the historical process leading to the law's creation is extensive and complex.

A crucial political strategy of Black movements was advocating for affirmative action policies for the Black population in Brazil, leading to significant advancements in the fight against racism. These transformations took shape in the broader context of resistance against the military dictatorship. Pereira (2017, p. 17) highlights that a pivotal moment in this struggle was the creation of the Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado — MNU), which sought to build a new society that valued Black culture within Brazil's historical narrative and advocated for a genuine racial democracy. The MNU had an important role in articulating race and class struggles to demand better living conditions for the Black population.

Then, Black activists "sought to establish spaces for dialogue in the executive and legislative branches, aiming to develop public policies to address the urgent demands of the Black population" across different sectors of society. They advocated against racism in the workplace, education, and other spheres (Pereira, 2017, p. 19). This effort later paved the way for new perspectives on struggles, strategies for action, and coordinated interventions against racism, with other Black movement organizations that began to gain traction.

Over time, earlier debates and strategies on racial issues gradually took shape in the form of anti-discrimination policies and legislation, such as the Law No. 10,639/2003 (Brasil, 2003), the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) — Cultural Plurality, and the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture. These measures were not only a response to the demands of Black movements but also a means of recognizing cultural and racial diversity and integrating them into the school curriculum.

> The report seeks to provide a response in the field of education to the demands of the Afro-descendant population by advocating for affirmative action policies — policies of reparations, recognition, and appreciation of their history, culture, and identity. It is about curricular policy based on historical, social, and anthropological dimensions rooted in the Brazilian reality, aiming to combat racism and discrimination that disproportionately affect Black individuals. From this perspective, it promotes the dissemination and production of knowledge, as well as the development of attitudes, perspectives, and values that educate citizens who take pride in their ethnic-racial heritage — whether they are of African, Indigenous, European, or Asian descent — so they can actively contribute to building a democratic nation in which everyone has their rights ensured and their identities valued. (Brasil, 2004a, p. 10)

As observed, activist efforts have been instrumental in securing a new political and social space for the anti-racist movement, particularly in education. In terms of legislation, this article is based on Law No. 10,639/2003 (Brasil, 2003) and Report 03/2004 of the National Education Council (CNE) (Brasil, 2004b), which establishes guidelines for the education of ethnic-racial relations and the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in basic education. These measures have conducted to significant cultural and epistemological shifts in schools across the country and in society (Pereira, 2017), "at the least prompting a critical examination of the Eurocentrism historically embedded in Brazilian curricula, while also holding the potential to reinforce an intercultural education that contributes to the consolidation of a democratic perspective in Brazilian education."

In this context, laws and political-pedagogical initiatives addressing racial issues and racism within school curricula and classrooms reflect the historical achievements of Black movements in various social spheres. The school environment is a strategic focal point in this action, serving as a privileged space for confronting and overcoming racism.

Regarding the implementation of Law No. 10.639/2003 (Brasil, 2003), it is essential to highlight that it includes literature as a fundamental resource for exploring topics related to Afro-Brazilian history and culture within the classroom. In this context, children's literature emerges as a powerful ally, given its social function and its capacity to broaden world awareness from an early age. Furthermore, it facilitates the discussion of complex subjects in a simple, clear, and playful manner, contributing to the development of children's imagination.

THE RELATION BETWEEN EUROCENTRISM, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, AND ANTI-RACISM

More than a source of pleasure and enchantment, literature is a space of infinite possibilities for shaping critical and diverse readers, helping them understand the world, culture, and society. According to Coelho (2000, p. 11), literature has been increasingly recognized as a "space of convergence for multiple languages that intersect in the contemporary landscape." She also highlights children's literature as a powerful tool for shaping a child's sense of self and worldview, because of its foundation that lies in words, thought, ideas, and imagination. The school, then, can serve as a privileged space for this development.

When analyzing children's literature, the author describes it as a linguistic phenomenon influenced by existential, social, and cultural experiences.

> Children's literature is, above all, literature, or rather, it is art: a creative phenomenon that represents the world, humanity, and life through words. It combines dreams and practical life, imagination and reality, ideals and their possible or impossible fulfillment.
>
> Literature is a distinct form of language that, like any other, expresses a particular human experience and is difficult to define with precision. Each era has understood and produced literature in its own way. And understanding this "way" undoubtedly means recognizing the uniqueness of each moment in humanity's long journey of continuous evolution. Exploring the literature created for children in different periods offers vision into the ideals, values, or even the contradictions upon which each society has been built and continues to be built. (Coelho, 2000, p. 28-29)

To highlight the characteristics that shaped (and continue to shape) literary production for children, in an area that began to be more critically examined in the late 1970s, Coelho (2000) conducts a comparative analysis of the concepts and patterns of thought or behavior that have influenced (or still influence) the themes and specificities that distinguish past and present literature. In other words, she contrasts works that bring "traditional values," established by 19th-century Romantic society, with those that reflect "new values," which emerged in response to the former.

One key difference is that literature based on traditional values reinforces an idealized notion of the individual, in which socially recognized virtues and qualities serve as aspirational models. In this framework, the social system prioritizes having over being and doing, reinforcing the privileges of elite minorities and the perceived superiority of men. Additionally, while such literature has, at times, attempted to critique racism, it often reinforces racial divisions, as "the separation between whites and Blacks remains evident, reflecting a concrete social reality" (Coelho, 2000, p. 23).

Regarding the "new values" present in contemporary literature, still emerging within a landscape where traditional values remain dominant, the author highlights key shifts. These include a *spirit of solidarity*, characters who challenge the societal truths imposed upon them; a *social system* that prioritizes being and doing over having, envisioning a world where social injustices and inequalities no longer exist; *destabilization of patriarchy* due to feminist liberation movements and shifts in family structures; a *perception of life* as a continuous process of change rather than an idealized state of perfection; and a clear commitment to *anti-racism*, increasingly prominent in children's literature, which actively seeks to recognize and celebrate diverse cultures and ethnicities in their authenticity.

Based on this comparison, it is possible to assert that contemporary children's literature is engaged in cultivating critical readers. The author accentuates the importance of considering the extraliterary factors influencing children's literature, particularly for those who teach or write for young audiences. She argues that:

> Such factors are fundamental to fostering a critical and evaluative reading of this new literature, which, without ceasing to be a source of emotion, enjoyment, or pleasure, can significantly support the educational task — paving the way for new generations toward the mindset that must soon be embraced by all… (Coelho, 2000, p. 27)

Studies on the representation of Black individuals in children's literature reveal that, historically, this body of work has contributed to the construction of a devalued Black racial and ethnic identity. It was largely a literature written by white authors, featuring predominantly white characters. Consequently, as Brookshaw (1983, p. 13) points out, there was a persistent use of demeaning modes of representation regarding Black identity.

> They gradually establish the meanings of "being Black" based on the constructed meanings of "being white." By attributing to the white world — through its characters — values considered positive (such as beauty, integrity, bravery, and intelligence), Black identity is implicitly positioned as the opposite, including ugliness, disloyalty, cowardice, ignorance, excessive sexuality, subservience, among others.

The way white individuals perceive Black people has been shaped since childhood by stories in which Blackness was associated with negative characteristics. The assignment of negative values to physical characteristics of Black bodies contributes to the development of low self-esteem, subtly reinforcing the ideology of whitening that permeates our society. In this sense, the way children read and interpret literary narratives can shape their understanding of what it means to be Black or white. Furthermore,

> Possessing the attributes considered negative leads Black or mixed-race children to learn from an early age that they are different because they have a face/body/hair that makes them seem inferior to other children: uglier, less interesting, poorer — even if that is not the case — , more likely to be given nicknames that exclude them from the world of those different from them. (Fonseca, 2000, p. 103)

The racial learning that Black and white children receive daily reinforces and shapes meanings related to Black ethnic-racial identity across various cultural and social spheres. For this reason, the potential of literature is emphasized here as a tool for promoting respect for differences, combating racism, fostering identity and self-esteem among Black children, and valuing Afro-Brazilian and African cultures. In other words, literature serves to expand one's worldview, encourage self-recognition, and enhance interpersonal relationships.

REFRAMING BLACK IDENTITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Among specialists from various fields of knowledge, the predominant notion of literature is that it is "a dynamic process of production/reproduction that, consciously or not, becomes an instrument of sociological, ethical, or political intervention" (Coelho, 2000, p. 28). In this sense, children's literature, which until recently was marginalized and regarded as a secondary or lesser genre, is now understood as much more than beautifully illustrated books meant for entertainment or aesthetic enjoyment. It is based on the premise that it can shape the reader's critical consciousness, given that social, cultural, and political processes are constantly evolving and influencing its creation. This transformation affects not only the literary material itself (structure, form, language, and genre), but also the ideological function of the literary product.

Since its origins, literature has been linked to the fundamental role of shaping individuals. In children's literature, this essence remains the same; however, the specificities that distinguish it are determined by the nature of its readership, children in this case. Through literature, they can "broaden, transform, and enrich their own life experiences to a degree of intensity unmatched by any other activity" (Coelho, 2000, p. 29).

Children's literature simultaneously provides pleasure, amusement, and stimulation for creativity while offering new ways of perceiving the world — and, consequently, new ways of thinking, reacting, and living. It can be, therefore, a tool with profound social significance and a means of fostering awareness of the world. However, it is important to emphasize that its use should be intentional, extending beyond mere entertainment.

Concerning children's literature, to contribute meaningfully to learning and add value to a shift in consciousness regarding the world, the educator plays a relevant role in this process, serving as the mediator in knowledge construction. It is essential that educators approach their work with intentionality, carefully considering their influence on young readers by presenting a literary universe that is both meaningful and engaging, fostering interaction and connection. After all, young readers tend to establish a strong identification with literary works, particularly with the protagonists.

Silveira *et al*. (2012) highlight the intrinsic link between children's literature and education. Their analysis of how diversity is represented in books for early elementary school children underscores the significant shifts in literary production in recent years. These changes stem from the growing societal emphasis on themes of difference, inclusion, and respect for diversity, which have inevitably influenced the educational sphere.

According to the authors, these changes reflect "a broader social landscape, about both the struggles of previously marginalized groups and recent political changes and legal decisions, which either result from or are connected to such struggles" (Silveira *et al*., 2012, p. 17). The increasing prominence of discourse and policies on inclusion has brought visibility to a diverse range of individuals with distinct demands and aspirations. Consequently, "different representations of what it means to be of a certain age, to be Indigenous, to be Black, to be a woman, to be a man, to be homosexual or heterosexual, to have a particular body type are brought into play, establishing a dynamic field of discursive clash" (Silveira *et al*., 2012, p. 19).

Since the mid-1990s until 2000s, themes related to difference have become a fertile ground for children's literature. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the discussion on ethnicity, the focus of this study, has received growing attention, as the teaching of African and Afro-descendant culture is one of the most pressing educational demands in contemporary Brazil.

The requirements established by Law No. 10,639/2003 (Brasil, 2003), which mandates the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture in the official curricula of both public and private schools, have led to a significant increase in the publication of books addressing ethnic-racial issues, with a relatively larger number of authors engaging with the topic. However, it is important to highlight that.

> Undoubtedly, these legal demands have their roots in social movements that, in this specific case, went beyond the fight against the historical discriminatory treatment of Black ethnicity in Brazilian society. They also stood firmly in the struggle for the recognition of the contributions of African-rooted culture to our daily lives in all its complexity. (Silveira *et al*., 2012, p. 185)

Thus, children's literature books began to specifically address situations of racism, to highlight the cultural traditions of African countries through the retelling of traditional African narratives, and to seek to reverse the history of Black ethnicity's invisibility in the representation of central

characters. The Black character, once negatively portrayed through exclusion, marginalization, stigma, and stereotype, has now gained voice and recognition. Their place in literature has changed: they have become protagonists.

When we think about education, it is essential to emphasize the importance of the school as an institution that shapes citizenship, and to remember that children construct their identities based on various references, which are directly linked to their self-esteem. Therefore, "the positioning of groups on racial issues is learned and internalized from a very early age. Once this occurs, behaviors are shaped, and stigmatizing ways of thinking and acting are structured" (Sousa, 2001, p. 61).

Speaking about the importance of children's literature during the Samba and Cultural Resistance Literary Party (*Festa Literária do Samba e Resistência Cultural* — Flisamba), held at Renascença Clube, Noguera (Literatura Infantil, 2017) highlights that literature serves to express realities, allowing children to discover other non-racist, anti-racist, Afro-centered, and Afro-perspectivist worlds and perspectives, that are essential for their development. This is because:

> Children always follow a literary and dramatic journey, engaging in what some call the avatar function. The child steps into the role of a character, and this character embarks on a complete journey. They enjoy identifying with the characters they encounter, whether Pedro, Manoel, Joaquim, Dandara, or anyone else. So, it is important to have characters that resemble our children. Otherwise, they will only identify with Frozen, Batman, Spider-Man, or Wonder Woman. They will only see themselves as heroes, heroines, princes, and princesses who are exclusively white characters, white children. From the perspective of identity formation and the construction of imagination, this is not only deeply limiting but also racist. (Literatura Infantil, 2017)

Based on that, providing children with a literary repertoire in which books feature Black protagonists and authorship contributes to reeducating perspectives on the stereotypical view of Black identity, fosters knowledge of different cultures, promotes the development of empathy, and encourages learning to respect others in their differences. Moreover, Black representation in children's books, through a protagonist character, is essential for reaffirming the self-esteem of children who share the same phenotypic and cultural characteristics. As Macena and Azevêdo (2020, p. 7) point out:

> (...) literature works featuring Black protagonists face the popular imagination shaped by narratives that Black people serve solely as enslaved laborers, a perspective often reinforced in educational materials. The history changes when it is told through the eyes of those who lived it, allowing students to see themselves in different roles, including that of social subjects, individuals with rights, history, and dignity.

Aligning with this perspective, Adichie (2019) advocates the importance of representation to ensure that no single story defines different peoples, cultures, and places. She warns of the dangers of this and recalls how, as a child, she only encountered fairy tales featuring white, blue-eyed characters living in cold climates — while she herself was Black and lived in a very hot region. She further emphasizes that her perception of literature changed only when she discovered African books and realized that girls like her, with dark skin and curly hair, could also exist in literature. The author highlights how impressionable and vulnerable we are to stories, particularly as children. This underscores the importance of ensuring that everyone feels included and represented.

Given this, and with the aim of fostering respect and awareness of prejudice arising from ethnic-racial issues — aligning with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Ethnic-Racial Relations Education and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture (Brasil, 2004a) — considerations will be made regarding the children's book *O mundo no Black Power de Tayó (The world in Tayó's Black Power)* by Kiusam de Oliveira (2013), presenting it as a meaningful approach to valuing and (re)acknowledging Black children.

O MUNDO NO BLACK POWER DE TAYÓ (*THE WORLD IN TAYÓ'S BLACK POWER*) AS A WAY OF PROMOTING THE APPRECIATION AND (RE)RECOGNITION OF BLACK CHILDREN

A prominent figure in Black activism and the fight against racism, Kiusam de Oliveira is a renowned educator and writer of Afro-referenced children's literature. Recognized by the United Nations (UN) as one of the ten most important authors for childhood education, she has received several awards for her literary work. Among her celebrated books is *Omo-Obá: Histórias de Princesas*, which marked the tenth anniversary of its first edition in 2019. Her works aim to foster the ethical-political engagement of educators while empowering children and young people by addressing the tensions present in ethno-racial relations.

A storyteller of Afro-Brazilian mythology at the Museu Afro Brazil, Kiusam holds a master's degree in school and human development psychology (1988) and a Ph.D. in culture, organization, and education (2008), both from the University of São Paulo (USP). Since 2009, she has published a series of children's and young adult books that have gained national and international recognition, addressing themes of racism and male chauvinism.

Through her writing, Kiusam seeks to expand children's cultural repertoire and imagination, challenging existing paradigms. Moving away from the stereotypes of submissive European princesses, her protagonists embody self-esteem, empowerment, and critical thinking. In this sense, Kiusam classifies her work as "Black Brazilian literature of enchantment", which values Afro hair and phenotypic features. As she states, "the idea is that both Black and non-Black children develop empathy and find new solutions to everyday problems."

The author's motivation to challenge the Eurocentric structures that dominate society stems from a personal childhood trauma — an experience of racism and humiliation inflicted by her teacher and classmates. This experience led her to write about racism in a way that children can understand, identify with, and find captivating. Her literature responds to the racial violence she suffered, offering other kids the opportunity to confront and navigate the same challenges.

One of Kiusam's most notable works is *O Mundo no Black Power de Tayó* (Oliveira, 2013), which received recognition from the São Paulo State Cultural Action Program (ProAC). The book, narrated in the third person and illustrated by Taisa Borges, tells the story of Tayó, a six-year-old Black girl whose beauty and joy are celebrated throughout the narrative, particularly through the appreciation of her naturally curly hair — her favorite hairstyle being the Black Power. Through this work, the author seeks to inspire Black girls to love their bodies and feel comfortable with their appearance.

This text serves a purpose beyond merely telling a story. It transcends various social factors by portraying Tayó's journey of identity formation through the acceptance of her hair, her phenotype, and her African ancestry. This is evident from the book's cover, where both the title and imagery suggest that the young girl carries the world in her hair. The illustration references the signature hairstyle of Black aesthetics, which has historically been — and continues to be — a symbol of affirmation, pride, respect, and resistance for those who fought to promote racial pride through the Black Power Movement, challenging Eurocentric beauty standards.

Beyond aesthetics, the Black Power hairstyle represents a reconnection between Black individuals and their African roots. Thus, the book emphasizes the significance of the hairstyle in influencing Tayó's identity and self-esteem, directly linking it to her ancestry. Additionally, African culture and the protagonist's psychological traits are reinforced through her name, Tayó, an African (Yoruba) name used for both boys and girls, meaning "[…] of joy" (Oliveira, 2013, p. 40). This definition, along with the origins and meanings of other African words, can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

The diverse and vibrant illustrations stand out not only for their colors but also for their lines and forms, evoking Africa in a positive light and enriching the reading experience. Consequently, they serve as an engaging element, inspiring children's imagination and inviting them into new empires of aesthetic gratitude. The illustrations vividly capture Tayó's joy and carry essential messages in a dynamic interplay with the text. In this sense, the book should be appreciated not only for its narrative but also for its visual storytelling, as the illustrations bring the narrator's words to life.

According to Corrêa (2008), illustrations in children's literature have a part in fostering affection, sensitivity, and an appreciation for poetic and aesthetic experiences. These elements are essential for developing a more humane world and for helping children grow a strong sense of self-acceptance, ultimately contributing to their empowerment and self-confidence. Given this, educators must be mindful of their choices when addressing ethnic-racial themes in the classroom, adopting a critical stance against the deeply ingrained negative representations historically associated with Black identity.

Beyond the visual aspect, the words and phrases highlighted in the text, presented in different fonts and colors, emphasize the girl's characteristics. These elements are always exalted, breaking with prejudices associated with Black phenotypes:

> TAYÓ is six years old. She is a girl of rare beauty. […] Her face appears as a precious frame, highlighting INFINITE BEAUTIES. Her EYES are BLACK, as black as the darkest and most beautiful nights […] From the depths of these dark eyes emerge sparks of a brilliance that only the stars can emit. Her nose resembles a broad and valuable GOLD NUGGET. (Oliveira, 2013, p. 8-12)

As the narrative explains, the narrator reveals that Tayó's favorite part of her body is her head, as she proudly carries her voluminous curly hair, always styled in a Black Power, which is why the hairstyle's name is included in the book's title. It is through this hairstyle that the story develops, bringing the narrative to life.

Full of self-esteem, the girl takes pride in her hair and feels powerful when it is voluminous. Driven by her appreciation for unique things, she plans her hairstyles with special, colorful, and playful ornaments. Her wishes are fulfilled by her mother, who enthusiastically dedicates herself to creating them. Due to the variety of decorations Tayó chooses — such as flowers, butterflies, and woolen threads — her hair becomes as immense as her imagination, making her want to project the world onto it, as illustrated in the following excerpt: "On her head, the part of her body she likes the most, she carries her enormous curly hair, always styled in a hairstyle called Black Power. Her hairstyle is a huge success because Tayó usually chooses the most playful decorations" (Oliveira, 2013, p. 17-18).

Like many Black children, Tayó also experiences racism, prejudice, and discrimination at school, as these issues remain deeply rooted in society. However, she does not pay attention to her classmates' insults. She is certain that her mother is a queen with a beautiful ancestry, and for this reason, she sees herself as a princess — just like all other girls. Confident that she carries a universe of stories on her head, with her hair as her crown, she finds comfort in her mother's love and her ancestral heritage whenever she faces criticism.

Tayó finds all her African roots in her Black Power, "projecting in her hairstyle all the joyful sounds and colors of the traditions that Black men and women managed to create and preserve, such as dances, games, African-rooted religions, games, songs, storytelling, and all forms of knowledge..." (Oliveira, 2013, p. 24). This empowers her to confront her classmates' racist remarks when they call her hair "bad." She always responds by affirming that her hair is soft, beautiful, and fragrant and that they are simply "jealous" because they cannot carry the world in their hair like she does (Oliveira, 2013, p. 27). The way the character perceives herself and reacts to discrimination aligns with Coutinho's (2009, p. 1) assertion that:

> In Brazil, over the years, we have witnessed the growth of a Black aesthetic with a positive valorization of "natural" phenotypic aspects. We can observe greater acceptance, or at least less rejection, by society of a model of hairstyling and adornment that differs from the "European standard."

Kiusam transforms Tayó's voluminous curly hair into a metaphor for the cultural richness of a people and the imagination of a girl who is self-assured, especially in her recognition of her heritage. For young readers who identify with the protagonist, reading the book can enhance their self-esteem by providing a positive representation of Black ethnic-racial identity.

More than just telling a story, this book enables recognition and self-awareness by addressing the protagonist's identity formation through the acceptance of her hair, phenotype, and ancestry, as seen in the following:

> But when she recovers her good mood, she can transform all sad memories into joy, projecting in her hairstyle all the joyful sounds and colors of the traditions that Black men and women managed to create and preserve, such as dances, games, African-rooted religions, games, songs, storytelling, and all forms of knowledge, demonstrating that neither chains nor shackles could imprison the powerful soul of her ancestors. (Oliveira, 2013, p. 31)

The World in Tayó's Black Power is one of the works that bring new perspectives on Black ethnic-racial belonging in contemporary Brazilian children's literature. It presents this identity in a valued, central, and protagonist manner, not limiting it merely to skin color or hair type — traits often taken as identity markers of Black racial belonging in Brazil — but also incorporating other ancestral traits constructed throughout the narrative, both in the written text and in the visual elements.

By cultivating ethnic-racial recognition and identity strengthening, where "if the relationships between text and images are well constructed in children's books, the possibility of the reader generating new stories is enhanced" (Fleck, Cunha, and Caldin, 2016, p. 199), *The World in Tayó's Black Power* aligns with what Cosson and Martins (2008, p. 66) describe as "[...] the affirmation of Black identity through the valorization and positive representation of physical (beauty) and intellectual (intelligence, protagonism) images [...]". Thus, it is a powerful tool for combating racism, raising plural education, and shaping more humanized individuals — respectful, tolerant, and self-aware — who also recognize the diverse dimensions of others and begin to see the cultures and traditions of various groups in society positively represented.

According to Santos (2001, p. 106), "racism ceases to be a problem of the discriminated and becomes a problem for all." The author further states that:

> Racial discrimination is not just a problem for Black children but an opportunity for Black and non-Black children to get to know each other, discuss, and establish new forms of relationships that impact their lives and society. (...) It is the school's duty

to ensure that history is told by multiple voices so that the future is written by many hands. It is necessary to break the silence to which Black and Indigenous people have been relegated in Brazilian historiography so that they can construct a positive image of themselves. (Santos, 2001, p. 106-107)

Representation in the education of Black children enables the re-signification of their identity, which, as we have seen, has been negatively constructed and socially denied. Black boys and girls suffer daily in a contemporary society that still rejects their image. Therefore, allowing these children to engage with literature that deconstructs the ideology of whitening — which has established a "Eurocentric beauty standard where beauty is associated with being white, having blonde and straight hair, leading many Black individuals not to see themselves in this standard and to adopt this ideology, denying their own identity for social acceptance" (Silva, 2018) — is a way to transform prejudice into inclusion and the appreciation of their own culture. The next section explores how these movements have shaped legislation and influenced pedagogical practices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding the school as one of the institutions where events, practices, thoughts, and reflections are discursively produced with various intentions, it becomes necessary to consider concrete pedagogical practices and educational policies capable of positively affirming Black identity. These practices should promote emancipatory movements and confront the multiple forms of violence materialized in prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion, ensuring the right to difference in both school and non-school contexts, with a view to social transformation through the transformation of individuals and social relationships.

The construction of an individual's identity begins in childhood and involves the references presented to them and those they encounter throughout their lives, whether positive or negative. Therefore, Black children need to see themselves as Black, learn to respect their self-image, and have role models that affirm this expectation.

Since literature is an integral part of children's experiences and allows for a rich interaction with them across cognitive, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions, it can serve as a pertinent tool for reflection and discussion on a wide range of issues, including ethnic-racial matters. It simultaneously contributes to the development of critical readers and encourages a sense of belonging.

In this sense, representation in children's literature can shape the identity and self-esteem of Black children in the early years of schooling. It is essential to provide a literary repertoire with an increasing number of protagonists who serve as models and establish meaningful connections with these children. This is particularly important given that many of them enter school with internalized Eurocentric references, which they continue to encounter in children's books.

This article's discussions and the analysis of *O Mundo no Black Power de Tayó* underscore the vital role of literary texts in addressing ethnic-racial issues. Literature enables individuals to recognize both others and them, leading to new interpretations of the world.

However, attention must be paid to the textual and visual quality of these works, selecting books that establish a meaningful relationship between text and illustration. Images represent another form of language beyond the textual, offering new perspectives and interpretations of the stories being read, especially for younger students. Therefore, illustrations should encourage dialogue and reflection.

Finally, it is hoped that this article has contributed to reflections on the importance of Black representation in children's literature and the need to expand the awareness of works featuring Black protagonists and stories that reclaim African ancestry for this audience. These efforts serve to

raise and promote respect for diversity while also overcoming prejudiced actions. Beyond providing new experiences, children's literature can educate.

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