

# Education and structural racism: teachers' views on racial discrimination experienced in the workplace

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**SHEILA STOLZ**

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, Brasil  
sheilastolz@furg.br

 [0000-0003-3591-7153](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3591-7153)

**LIANA BARCELOS PORTO**

Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Brasil  
lianaporto@ufpel.br

 [0000-0002-6098-4393](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6098-4393)

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## ABSTRACT

The research in question was developed together with the Center for Research and Extension in Human Rights (NUPEDH) and the Research Group Law, Gender and Plural Identities (DGIPLUS), both linked to the Postgraduate Program in Law and Social Justice at the Faculty of Law (FADIR) from the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG/Brazil). We sought to investigate, analyze, and understand how structural racism – a phenomenon understood as systematic racial discrimination present in sociopolitical structures – is experienced by teachers who self-identify as black and who work in the public and private primary and secondary education network in the city of Canguçu located in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil. Aiming to achieve the proposed objective, the deductive research method was adopted, comprising bibliographical research (scientific articles, theses, and books) and critical-reflective analysis of the collected

## RESUMEN

*Educación y racismo estructural: opiniones de los docentes sobre la discriminación racial experimentada en el lugar de trabajo*

*La investigación en cuestión fue desarrollada en conjunto con el Centro de Investigación y Extensión en Derechos Humanos (NUPEDH) y el Grupo de Investigación Derecho, Género e Identidades Plurales (DGIPLUS), ambos vinculados al Programa de Posgrado en Derecho y Justicia Social de la Facultad de Derecho (FADIR) de la Universidad Federal de Río Grande (FURG/Brasil). Buscamos investigar, analizar y comprender cómo el racismo estructural —fenómeno entendido como discriminación racial sistemática presente en estructuras sociopolíticas— es vivido por docentes que se autoidentifican como personas negras y que trabajan en la red pública y privada de educación primaria y secundaria en la ciudad de Canguçu ubicada en el estado de Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brasil. Para alcanzar el objetivo*

material. As the aim was also to understand the reality of black teachers, empirical research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with all 41 black teachers out of a total of 775 teachers who work in the educational system in the city of Canguçu. Among the obtained results, the fact that the majority, that is, 99% of the teachers interviewed, stated that they had experienced situations of prejudice in work relationships and when teaching in the classroom stands out. Both the number of black teachers in the city of Canguçu and the testimonies of the interviewees corroborate the existence of structural racism in the educational sphere, since, as the authors who underlie the research emphasize, racial discrimination is one of the elements that make up the sociopolitical organization and economic aspects of Brazilian society.

**Keywords:** Structural Racism; Education; Human Rights; Empirical Study.

*propuesto, se adoptó el método de investigación deductivo que comprendió la investigación bibliográfica (artículos científicos, tesis y libros) y el análisis crítico-reflexivo del material recolectado. Como el objetivo también era comprender la realidad de los docentes negros, se realizó una investigación empírica a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas con las(os) 41 docentes autoidentificadas(os) como personas negras(os) de un total de 775 docentes que actúan en el sistema educativo de la ciudad de Canguçu. Entre los resultados obtenidos destaca el hecho de que la mayoría, es decir el 99% de las(os) docentes entrevistadas(os), afirmó haber vivido situaciones de prejuicio en las relaciones laborales y a la hora de enseñar en el aula.*

*Tanto el número de docentes negras(os) en la ciudad de Canguçu como los testimonios de las(os) entrevistadas(os) corroboran la existencia de racismo estructural en el ámbito educativo, ya que, como destacan las(os) autoras(es) que sustentan teóricamente la investigación, la discriminación racial es uno de los elementos que componen la organización sociopolítica y aspectos económicos de la sociedad brasileña.*

**Palabras clave:** Racismo estructural; Educación; Derechos humanos.; Estudio Empírico.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The surveys researched developed in the scope of the Center for Research and Extension in Human Rights (NUPEDH/FADIR/FURG) and the Research Group Law, Gender and Plural Identities (DGIPLUS/FADIR/FURG) and transcribed in this article was to understand, through the testimonies of black teachers from the city of Canguçu (Brazil), how they perceive the teaching practice carried out and whether they have experienced any type of racial discrimination in their workplaces that strengthens the structural racism that involves all segments of Brazilian society, not excluding formal education.

From a theoretical point of view, we understand that discriminatory actions strengthen the structural racism that underlies and involves all segments of Brazilian society, not excluding formal education.

The deductive method of research was adopted, contemplated by bibliographical research (scientific articles, theses and books) and by of the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interviews were carried out after the quantitative mapping of black teachers in all education institutions in the municipality both public (municipal and state) or private. Together, these institutions have a total of 775 teachers, 41 of whom are black. With this number of black teachers working in the city of Canguçu, we conducted semi-structured interview with all the teachers. However, the majority refrained from answering the questionnaire.

Based on the data produced, it was noted that most of the participants in the survey had suffered some form of racism in their work environment (school), and that these situations had been witnessed by other people who had refused to offer any kind of solidarity. When asked about racism in the municipality of Canguçu, the interviewees said that it was a veiled social phenomenon that was deeply rooted in socio-political practices.

Both the number of black teachers and the discriminatory experiences they face in the workplace reveal, in addition to the minimal inclusion of black teachers at all levels of formal education, one of the many faces of structural racism.

## **2. DELIMITING THE FIELD OF STUDY**

According to Secretaria de Planejamento, Governança e Gestão (SPGG/RS, 2022) the population of the state of Rio Grande do Sul is 79% white and 21% black. In terms of age composition, the population aged over 60 is higher among white people (21%) than among black people (15%). Among people under-18s 20% are white and 24% black.

Concerning schooling, there are higher illiteracy rates among black people than among white people.

Regarding basic education, there are higher rates of people with one or more years of school delay at both levels of basic education among non-white people than among white people. Similarly, White people increase their participation in the 3rd grade of secondary school, while black people decrease it.

High school dropout rates are also higher among black people (8,6%) than for white people (6,8%). In higher education, 76,6% of people being admitted to face-to-face courses were white and 12,7% black. Of those completing higher education, 10,6% were black. Another important piece of data concerns race/color groups, since most students in basic, primary and secondary

education are divided as follows: the majority of white students study in the private school system and the majority of black and indigenous people in the public school system.

The reality of the state of Rio Grande do Sul mentioned above can also be seen in the population data for the city of Canguçu. The peculiarity of this study lies precisely in observing the experience of black teachers in the city of Canguçu, which has a majority white population, even though it is home to many Quilombola communities, and also has an important specificity: it is the municipality with the largest number of smallholdings in Brazil with around fourteen thousand rural properties, and it is nationally recognized as the National Capital of Family Farming.

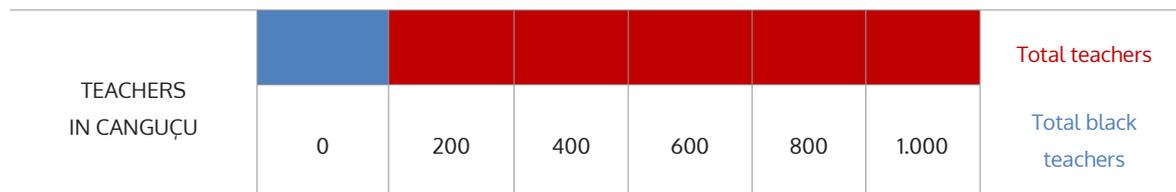
The self-declared black population in Rio Grande do Sul totals 1,725,166 people, corresponding to the 2010 demographic census carried out by IBGE, representing 16,13% of the state's inhabitants. Allowing to the same census, Canguçu has a population of 53,259 and has a total of fifteen quilombo associations, most of which are in the countryside of the municipality. Also, conforming to this census, the black population totals 4,731 people, that is, 9,38% of the municipality's total population. The black population mainly works in family farming, commerce, the town hall and self-employed activities. Most of this population live in neighbourhoods further away from the city center (peripheral region of the town).

During the previous readings and initial survey of data and bibliographies, it was noticed that the number of black teachers in the city of Canguçu was small, and from this some questions arise: How many black teachers are there in this municipality? Who are they? What are the school memories and pedagogical practices of these teachers? Where did they go to school? The research proposal carried out and transcribed in this article aimed to quantify and answer these questions, as well as to understand and give visibility to the possible racial discrimination experienced by self-declared black teachers in the exercise of their profession. developed in the city's educational system, rescuing the subjective memories of these professionals.

### **3. EDUCATIONAL REALITY AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

The city of Canguçu has thirty-five municipal schools (ten of which are in the city center and the other twenty-five in rural areas), sixteen state schools, three private schools, APAE and EFASUL. Together, these institutions have a total 775 teachers, 41 of whom are black, as it can be seen in the graph in Figure 1, i.e., 5,29% of the teachers in the city of Canguçu are black.

Figure 1. Total teachers and the proportion of black teachers in Canguçu.



Source: Graph drawn up by the researcher based on a survey she carried out in: January/2022.

The data collected and transposed in the Table above reveals something fundamental about racism: its institutionality. Kwame Turu and Charles Hamilton (2011), in the book “Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America” published in 1967, construct the concept of institutional racism, alerting to the fact that racism is much more than the actions of individuals with personal motivations, as it is infiltrated in institutions and culture, creating a priori difficulties for the black population.

We understand, therefore, that racism is one of the pillars that structure the socio-political and economic relations of Brazilian society. In the same sense, jurist Almeida (2019) presents statistical data and discusses how structural racism.

In the field of education, Teixeira (2006, p.15) makes use of census data from the year 2000 to affirm that the occupation of teacher is expressively white in all regions and units of the Federation of Brazil. Caetano et. all. says:

The historical and social discrimination suffered by past generations tends to transmit the consequences of their structural inequalities to future generations, resulting in an unbearable and unacceptable social, economic, cultural aesthetic and subjective burden to be borne by posterity. The consequences of discrimination not only affect individuals, peoples, and populations. They are also felt in the development of the society, affecting the identity of democracy and the regime of citizenship. (2017, p. 97)

These sequelae of discriminatory processes that several authors, including the aforementioned educator, point out in their studies, also appear in the responses produced by the teachers participating in this research. In this sense, Souza (2007) also warns that: “To narrate is to enunciate a particular reflected experience on which we construct a sense and give meaning. We search our memory, consciously or unconsciously, for what should be said and what should be kept quiet” (p. 66).

We sought to analyze the open-ended responses as narratives that those involved in the research produced by thinking, speaking and writing about themselves, letting their subjectivities and particular experiences emerge.

This concept presented by Souza is intertwined with the purposes of this research, since we intend to learn about the memories and representations constructed by black teachers in Canguçu.

We are aware that it would be interesting to go more deeply into the history of black people in Brazil and in Rio Grande do Sul as well as the sociology that deals with the “racial” issue in Brazil. However, at another time we will use an in-depth study of such subject, based on the studies of Schwarcz (2019,1993) which aim to understand the relevance and the transformation of racial theory in Brazil, emphasizing the understanding of “how the racial argument was politically and historically constructed, as well as the concept of “race”, which, besides its biological definition, ended up receiving a social interpretation.

#### **4. METHODOLOGICAL PATHS**

To follow this path, we will use quantitative and qualitative research and the questionnaire technique.

In order to choose the subjects for the present research, we contacted all the 41 black teachers working in the municipality, through the education secretariats: Canguçu city and Rio Grande do Sul state, who provided their full names and contact details (full name, e-mail and WhatsApp).

As previously mentioned, we used a questionnaire to collect data. Agreeing to Lakatos et al. (2003), questionnaires are “a data collection instrument consisting of an ordered series of questions to be answered in writing without the presence of the interviewer. In general, the researcher sends the questionnaire to the informer by post or courier. Once completed, the respondent returns it in the same way” (p. 201).

The aforementioned authors do not mention the issue of sending questionnaires online due to the historical period they were inserted, but their comments on the technique are still relevant and, therefore, they are present in the study. They comment that, when using this technique, the researcher should, along with the questionnaire, they send a letter or note “explaining the nature of the research, its importance, and the need to obtain answers, trying to arise the recipient’s interest, so that they fill in and return the questionnaire within a reasonable period of time.” This was the approach we took, and together with the questionnaire we sent the consent form and a letter introducing the researchers.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of this technique, Lakatos et al. (2003, p. 201-202) make a series of analyzes summarized in the following paragraphs.

The advantages can be enumerated as follows: 1) It saves time, travel and one may obtain a large amount of data; 2) It reaches more people simultaneously; 3) It covers a wider geographical area; 4) It saves personnel, both in training and in field work, 5) You get faster and more accurate responses; 6) There is greater freedom in the answers, due to anonymity; 7) There is more security as the answers are not identified; 8) There is less risk of distortion because the researcher has no influence; 9) There is more time to respond and at a more favorable time; 10) There is more uniformity in the evaluation, due to the impersonal nature of the instrument. 11) You obtain answers that would be materially inaccessible.

The disadvantages can be listed as follows: 1) Small percentage of questionnaires that are sent back; 2) A large number of unanswered questions; 3) It cannot be applied to illiterate people; 4) Inability to help the respondent with misunderstood questions the difficulty of understanding, on part of the respondents, leads to an apparent uniformity; 5) When Reading all the questions before answering them, one question may influence another; 6) Late return will affect its usage; 7) Not knowing the circumstances in which they were filled in makes control and verification difficult; 8) It is not always the chosen person the one who actually responds the questionnaire, thus invalidating the questions; 9) It requires a more homogeneous universe. Before answering the semi-structured questionnaire, the interviewee was informed about the research objectives, as well as the full name of the researchers - including ways of contacting them.

Access to filling out the semi-structured questionnaire by the interviewee was only possible after reading and acceptance by the interviewee of the FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT TERMS (TCLE) - made available as established in Resolution n°. 466, of December 12, 2012, of the Ministry of Health (BRAZIL).

All interviewees who decided to participate in the research signed the ICF.

The semi-structured questionnaire was sent via email, as it was considered the best way to avoid any type of embarrassment to the interviewee.

It should be noted, however, that the researchers in the email sent made themselves available to those interviewed who preferred to answer the semi-structured questionnaire in person. Even though the researchers were approached to provide clarifications and listen to some reports of racial discrimination, there was no request to apply the semi-structured questionnaire in person.

The semi-structured questionnaire was sent to the 41 black teachers in Canguçu. Of these, 11 responded, that is, 26.8% of the total number of black teachers in the city responded to the research instrument.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA OBTAINED

Based on people's responses, we can outline some important points for better contextualization and subsequent reflection.

Most participants are aged between 38 and 40, self-declare themselves black, are in an emotional relationship with someone and have children. All of them have a degree in humanities, a post-graduate degree in education, and have been working in education for more than 5 years. Most of them have other jobs besides teaching (waiter, personal trainer, businessman, waitress, etc.). None of them has/is studying for a Master's degree or PhD.

When asked about the presence of black people in their education, the majority reported not having had any black teachers. The few who said they had had black teachers throughout their education (basic education, high school, undergraduate and specialization) mentioned 1 or 2 teachers throughout their schooling. Regarding black classmates, all of them reported having had one, but the maximum number was 4 black classmates.

The majority, 99%, said they had experienced prejudiced situations. Most of such situations came mainly from students' parents. They also reported (90%) that there had been no solidarity from colleagues, school directing boards, and/or third parties at the time of the racist or offensive event. It is worth mentioning that 90% of the interviewees were in favor of affirmative action policies (quotas) in all levels of formal education.

Thinking about the interviewees' statements, we can think about what Munanga (2008) says about racism in Brazil, that it has a peculiarity, and that this peculiarity is a voice that screams, that echoes inside every Brazilian "I am not racist", and for the author this scream is the voice of inertia. In other words, if I am not racist, there is no racism and we don't need to talk/think about it. The myth of the racial democracy established by Gilberto Freyre in *A Casa Grande e Senzala* (The Big House and the Slaves), which continues to this day. Not willing to admit that prejudice exists is a way of avoiding conflict, discussion on the subject, or even recognizing the privileges of whiteness, but it can also serve as a self-defense mechanism for those who, feeling the subtlety of being looked down because of their color, end up using denial as a subterfuge for the pain caused by the conflicts that still involve race relations. As we

can see from the excerpts from the teachers surveyed and presented here under a codename of Quilombola Communities:

ROSE said: *"I would like to talk to my son's teacher... Sure, it's me. You?! Are colored people teaching now?! Oh my, what a world we're living in!"*

PALMAS said: *"Some people don't value professional work because I am black. They use derogatory and racist words. They criticize racial equality laws. They also do not acknowledge the importance of black people in society and in the history of our country."*

IPÊ said: *"There was a situation where a parent came in to make a request, went into the office and went straight to a (white) colleague who was in the room. She passed the word to me, and several other times they ask me: 'are you the school cook?' Things like this happen every day".*

BUTIÁ said: *"What bad hair you have! Why don't you straighten it?"*

SOLIDÃO said: *"I've been cursed by students' parents several times, but that was in the old days. Nowadays they're afraid of the laws, but I always see disapproving looks, I've got used to it. And I can see discrimination in the classroom, among the students, at moments of group activities, a group of German descent didn't allow others to take part in classroom activities".*

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Having as a basis, among others, the writings of Fanon (2008), we can see that racism dresses up in different masks and thus "dances" through life, through social spaces. Thus, sometimes disguised, subtly wandering through the crowd, the depreciation of history of others is legitimized and leaves historical footprints, that insist on reinventing themselves and remaining present. Promoting old and new forms of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion.

Therefore, we hope that this article contributes for the understanding of the meaning of racial prejudice, which sometimes operates externally, and sometimes, no less seriously, camouflages itself, disguises itself, but only demarcates that the place of the black person can never be above a position occupied by a white person. May we be attentive to the subtlety that marks racist clothing, which makes it difficult to describe and identify its post-modern tyrants who are increasingly concealed in their masks.

May the excerpts from the speeches of black teachers at educational institutions in the town of Canguçu presented here lead us to understand that behind their sometimes silent struggles, in the search for equality, justice and social reparation, there is an extensive journey

of the black population that is still unknown or denied by whiteness. And that this walk, this march, this movement, unfortunately does not signal the realization of their rights as citizens, being surrounded by obstacles and hindrances that perpetuate the segregation, instead of providing bridges of approximation and respect for others.

In the hope that this production will lead to reflections on the school sphere as the first institution of social contact and interpersonal relationships, it is there that exclusionary and segregationist cultural matrices, but mainly it is also in the school environment that we form people engaged in the struggles for human rights and social equality (Stolz, 2013; Stolz et. Al., 2023), so dear to the Brazilian society.

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