DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY: TEACHER DILEMMAS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Although the incorporation of issues related to difference in educational research and practice has clearly been growing in recent years, its approach still brings more concerns than answers. Our intention in this text is to contribute toward those discussions, focusing the inequality-difference tension identified in representations of teachers expressed in the focal group organized in the context of the research Multiculturalism, human rights and education: tension between equality and difference. Among the various viewpoints emerging on the Latin American continent, we work within the intercultural perspective. The meanings attributed to the word difference by the participants of the focal group in question are problematized, so that in conclusion we will discuss the association of the word difference with prejudice and discrimination, as a well as its meaning as inequality. We also focus the productivity of the focal group as an alternative to the collective interview, since it provided a privileged space for interaction among the participants, offering an opportunity for discursive constructions less directed by the research and closer to their everyday practices.

FOCAL GROUPS ● MULTICULTURALISM ● SOCIAL INEQUALITY ● TEACHERS

> Are we all equal or are we all different? Do we want to be equal or do we want to be different? There was a time when the answer lay, self-assured, in the first half of these formulations. However, one quarter of a century ago the answer shifted.
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> (PIERUCCI, 1999, p. 7)

DO WE WANT TO BE EQUAL OR DO WE WANT TO BE DIFFERENT?

Rather: why should we have to choose between one or another horizon of social identification and relations? Does difference exclude equality? We argue that it does not. However, Pierucci's dichotomy is often put forward when arguing against the incorporation of issues of

difference in educational surveys and practices. In this article we address this controversy, tackling the synonymy ascribed by primary school teachers to the terms "inequality" and "difference". This semantic slippage was identified in the statements of teachers taking part in the focus group held by the Study Group on Daily School Life and Culture(s) (*Grupo de Estudos sobre Cotidiano Escolar e Cultura(s* – Gecec[1]) within the context of the study entitled "Multiculturalism, human rights and education: the tension between equality and difference" (*Multiculturalismo, direitos humanos e educação: a tensão entre igualdade e diferença*) which motivated the present reflection, structured as follows: first we paint a broad picture of the study of which the focus group was a part, describing the group and justifying our choice of this collective interviewing modality; we then analyze the meanings given by the participants to the word "difference" in the focus group context. We also discuss its frequent association with the topic of prejudice and discrimination, and in conclusion highlight ways in which these issues may be addressed in the contemporary school space and time.

THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group was the second stage of the empirical approach to the issue of cultural differences taken by the survey, whose overall goal was defined in its design as:

> To analyze tensions between equality and difference in social and educational practices, with special emphasis on identifying the representations[2] of primary school teachers and characterizing the teaching devices used by them in everyday school life to address this problem.

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[1] A research group that has carried out studies into the relations between education and culture since 1996; it is funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (*Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* – CNPq).

[2] "Representation is the process whereby members of the culture use language (broadly defined as any system employing signs, any signifying system) to produce meanings. This definition includes the important premise that things – objects, people, events happening in the world – do not possess any established, final or true meaning in themselves. It is we – in society, in human cultures – who make things mean what they mean" (Hall, apud Candau, 2003).

Previously, in the same study, individual interviews with primary school teachers had shown how difficult these teachers found it to identify and tackle cultural differences in everyday school life, a situation already perceived in other investigations by Gecec.

This finding led us to believe it would be timely to identify some teachers sensitive to the issues of cultural differences in everyday school life and invite them to take part in discussions based on their own teaching experiences with this matter. We therefore chose to hold a focus group which would enable us to go deeper into the debate on cultural differences at school, acknowledging them and the challenges they pose, from the perspective of working through them in a school dynamic where they are present.

Focus groups are understood to be one modality of collective interviewing; however, there is no single concept of what a focus group is, and definitions may range from the formal and restricted to the extremely open.

In a dialogue with Krueger (1994), we understand focus groups to be an interviewing technique whose target is people selected by the researcher, on the basis of specific characteristics, in order to obtain qualitative information. Within this definition, the principal features are: clear intentionality, a defined focus and shared characteristics, and it is therefore not a spontaneously formed group. In his view, focus groups are a series of planned discussions intended to obtain information and identify representations in a given area of interest, within a permissive and nonthreatening environment. Groups are generally made up of a small number of participants and mediated by a suitably prepared interviewer. Group members interact and influence each other by means of comments on ideas and issues that are being discussed. We further point out that focus groups do not aim to reach conclusions, consensus or recommendations. We agree with Gatti that

> ...emphasis falls on interaction within the group and not on the questions and answers between the moderator and group members. The interaction that happens and the exchanges that occur will be studied by the researcher in light of his or her objectives. What is interesting is not only what people think and say, but also how they think and why they think what they do think. (2005, p. 9)

In the case of the focus group in question, the main criterion for choosing participants was our finding of a range of manifestations of sensitivity and commitment in identifying and tackling cultural differences in everyday school life. However, other aspects were also present, such as seeking information on various curriculum areas, the range of grades in

primary school, and experience within the public education system. Sixteen professionals were contacted, and 12 took part in the focus group. We believe that this number of participants is slightly too high for the type of dynamic that focus groups provide. However, given the teachers' availability and not least their willingness to take part in the meeting, we preferred to accommodate them all and try to adjust the process in order to enable the discussion we wished to elicit. We do not believe that the number of participants affected how the focus group went; on the contrary, it enriched it.

We asked the participants' permission to record and film the meeting and the whole activity flowed suitably in a climate of mutual openness, dialogue and involvement. At certain moments the research team sent written messages to the moderator about issues that had emerged in the discussion that we thought it worthwhile, for our research, to go into in more detail. At the end of the debate the teachers thanked us for the opportunity to take part in the meeting, obviously having valued the interaction with their colleagues, and made it clear that they felt there should be more such occasions for discussion and exchange between educationalists from different curriculum areas and different schools.

Of the 12 participants, three were men and nine were women. Below is a brief description of the profile of the interviewees based on the data they gave us in their enrolment cards, given to them at the start of the activity, and on their statements during the ongoing focus group process.

The group is very heterogeneous, made up of recently qualified professionals as well as others with a broad teaching experience, from a range of curriculum areas, working in the first and second segments of primary school, as well as secondary school, reinforcement education for young people and adults, and in higher education. Several possessed experience as pedagogical coordinators and school directors, and had taken part in such specific projects as the so-called Nucleus for Adolescent Multipliers (*Núcleo de Adolescentes Multiplicadores*) of the Municipal Education Secretariat of Rio de Janeiro, the Social Action Department (i.e. voluntary social work) of a private school and the integration of handicapped students into normal classes in a federal public school.

Four had up to 10 years' experience, five had from 11 to 20 years, and three had been teachers for more than 20 years, one of whom was a female teacher who declared she had had a 33-year teaching career. Three possessed a teacher training qualification in History, three in Physical Education, two in Biological Sciences, two in Geography, one in Pedagogy, and

another in Portuguese (*Letras* – language and literature); one teacher said she had taken the high-school-level primary-school teacher-training course formerly known as "ensino normal". Several postgraduate courses were mentioned: specialization courses (such as Media, and Sports Training) and Master's level courses (History – two, Education – one). Extension and further training courses were also mentioned in topics such as teaching literacy, and art education.

Virtually all (11) had had experience in public schools, in the education systems of a range of cities, in the state and in the federal systems, and many had also taught or were teaching in private schools. Only one, a relatively inexperienced teacher (four years' teaching experience when the focus group was held), had only had experience in a private school. A significant number of the participants in the focus group are teaching or have taught in public or private schools with an excellent academic reputation in municipalities of greater Rio de Janeiro, as well as in public schools without such a reputation. In terms of race, three female teachers identified themselves during the discussions as black.

We would like to highlight another particularly important aspect besides the heterogeneity of training and experience in formal education: most of the participants had been or were still active in a range of social organizations[3], which enables us to raise the hypothesis that integration in a range of social movements and in formal education practices, where the issue of difference is more visible, because of the ideal of social justice and transformation that drives them, may have led these focus group participants to be more sensitive to the whole issue of cultural difference in society and in schools. They may thus have followed a particular pathway through the issue of multi/interculturalism in general, arising from the social movements, and then have entered the world of academia.

After this profile of the participants we now set forth our analysis of the meanings of difference identified in the statements recorded in the focus group.

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[3] Casa da Mulher Trabalhadora – CAMTRA (*House of the Working Woman*), Novamerica: this organisation works with education in human rights, and Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré – CEASM (*The Centre for Solitary Studies and Actions*): non-governmental organisations; the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ); University study groups, such as the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF)'s *Observatório de Indústria Cultural* (Observatory of the Cultural Industry); community university entrance exam and training groups such as the Organização Instituto Palmares de Direitos Humanos; and residents' associations, among other activities.

DIFFERENCE, SOCIETY, INEQUALITY

The concept of language that we work with in Gecec made it essential to identify and analyze the meanings ascribed to the word "difference". Not unreasonably, three cornerstones of the cultural focus within educational issues share a common concern with language: firstly, proposals and theoretical treatments of interculturality in education in Latin American Andean countries, mainly owing to the presence of indigenous populations, with bilingualism in the center of discussion (ZÚÑIGA CASTILLO, ANSIÓN MALLET, 1997); secondly, in popular education, the weight that Paulo Freire ascribed to language may be mentioned for the importance and meaning of the "generative words" in his theory and practice related to adult literacy; and thirdly, in Europe, authors involved with the New Sociology in Education such as the British sociologist Basil Bernstein, centered their discussions on the issue of language, refuting the theory of linguistic and cultural deficit. In the current scene, the intercultural perspective is marked by the linguistic gaze in some of its most recent theoretical developments:

> I agree with post-structuralists on a number of critical points: that language does not present us with a faded copy of some homogeneous and unchanging reality; that there exists "no privileged epistemological language which would allow us untroubled access to the real"; that "objects are internal to the discourses which constitute them" and that "language is not just some passive reflection of reality but actively constitutive of it." (MCLAREN[4], 2000, p. 182)

In organizing the script for the debate with the focus group, we were particularly concerned with recognition of the constitutive dimension of language justifying the pursuit of the different meanings attributed to the term "difference", aiming to find clues to understand the multiple effects of reality that impact everyday life in school. We were also interested in understanding the meaning constructed in the act of enunciation itself[5], which explains that

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[4] Although Peter McLaren works within a multicultural perspective, we often dialogue with this author because of his option for what he calls "critical multiculturalism", which comes close to our concept of interculturalism.

[5] "Imagine a language-game in which A asks and B reports the number of slabs or blocks in a pile, or the colours and shapes of the building-stones that are stacked in such-and-such a place. – Such a report might run: 'Five slabs'. Now what is the difference between the report or statement 'Five slabs' and the order 'Five slabs!'?

the meaning given by the interviewees was not directly addressed in the focus group script: the questions had to do with daily school practices or required the teachers to take up a position vis-à-vis uses that are concrete and situated in the word in question, as in the case of the opening question of the debate which asked interviewees about the statement "Being different is normal"[6].

However, before advancing in our analysis of the meanings recorded in the focus group, we must clarify the meaning we give to two core terms in our approach: intercultural perspective and difference.

The polysemy of the words multiculturalism and interculturalism seems to match the complexity of the social issues to which they refer. There have been many texts published in an attempt to organize the range of ways in which these issues may be approached [7], both at the level of academic theory, and at the level of practices in public policies and social mobilization. It would not make sense to expose these taxonomies once more, but this abundance of classifications entails a need to qualify, however briefly, the perspective that we have chosen in our study. Among other possible interlocutors, we shall cite French theorist Jean Claude Forquin (1993, 2000), who makes an important distinction between two basic meanings for multiculturalism: it may merely describe a situation in which different cultural backgrounds come into contact, without polemicizing the content of this interaction; and it may also refer to proposals for an approach to this cultural multiplicity – and this is obviously the meaning which interests us. Taking this second meaning, and returning to the educational field, Forquin presents another, equally fundamental, distinction: unitarists privilege the construction of a common curriculum, to be built on the basis of a plurality of cultural traditions integrated in the context where the school is located; whereas differentialists would emphasize the need to preserve the different cultures, which would mean setting up separate institutions for these groups. We diverge with this author from the unitarist trend, because

Well, it is the part which uttering these words plays in the language-game. No doubt the tone of voice and the look with which they are uttered, and much else besides, will also be different. But we could also imagine the tone's being the same — for an order and a report can be spoken in a *variety* of tones of voice and with various expressions of face — the differences only being in the application" (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 17).

[6] A 2005 publicity campaign created by the agency Giovanni FCB, for the Down Syndrome Society.

[7] Forquin, 1993, McLaren, 2000, Torres, 2001, Candau, 2002, Willinsky, 2002, Hall, 2003, Santos and Nunes, 2003, among others.

they play down the issues of power and hierarchy that are involved in the contact between different sociocultural traditions, but we also disagree with differentialists because we refuse all segregationalist solutions to this problem. We have thus chosen the expression "interculturalism", which points up, even in its prefix, the open and interactive character we believe is of the utmost importance in addressing cultural difference within the school environment. The same expression is used by other authors, such as Margarita Bartolomé Pina (1997) in Spain, and Catherine Walsh (2005) in Ecuador, in very different contexts, but with meanings close enough to justify reference to them in this article: apart from defending dialogue between different cultural groups that meet in school spaces, they highlight the inequalities that may mark these relations and the need to face them systematically.

However, this proposal becomes more complex when we assume the contributions of poststructuralism to consider who actually are these "different cultural groups" that are interacting – at this point we must clarify what we are talking about when we refer to "difference" and also to "cultural identity". To synthesize the dialogue we have established with a number of authors within this perspective (BHABHA, 2007, HALL, 2003, 2003a, LACLAU, MOUFFE, 2006, among others), we highlight aspects we deem central in the concept of difference and cultural identity with which we are working: the radical criticism of identitary essentialism, recognizing the provisional, fragmentary and hybrid nature of cultural identifications – aspects that mark the very "differences" they characterize. In fact this perspective emphasizes the acknowledgement of the close links between identity – in this conception, better named "identification" – and difference: cultural identification is understood to be made by an endless chain of negations, in other words, what one is, is not defined by the assertion of a positive content, but by a succession of distinctions from other contents. Cultural difference never "is", but always "is being". Therefore, when we talk of intercultural dialogue, we are not presupposing a meeting of fixed cultures and identifications: the dialogue we advocate occurs at fleeting moments of fixation which are contingent upon cultural meanings and identities and marked by unpredictability and tentativeness, by the impossibility of full translation, by hurdles that multiple power struggles place in its way. However it is marked also by recognition of its absolute necessity: we know that life is provisional and this does not make it less important. By defending intercultural dialogue we aim to act on the transformation of the contingency we actually experience – we act where we can act.

In the following section, therefore, we analyze the meanings of the expression "difference" arising in the debate that took place within the focus group, as well as the relations between difference and inequality that are explicit or underlying to such movements of signification, with the intercultural perspective as a benchmark and the concept of difference that we have tried to synthesize in preceding paragraphs.

SIGNIFICATIONS

In the introductory debate – on the statement "Being different is normal" – there is an early reference to biodiversity, in the following affirmation: " If everyone was equal it would be very boring!" (Flora) – a way of valuing difference that is widespread in society[8] and which seems to come close to the meaning ascribed by Bhabha to the expression "diversity":

> Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a timeframe of relativism, it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. (2007, p. 63)

Cultural plurality is celebrated, making the instability of its content and the issues of power that pervade it secondary. However, this perspective was the minority in that particular discussion space, and neither the teacher herself nor the other participants return to it. In fact, the acceptance of difference by society was immediately questioned: "I think that being different is normal, but I think that these posters bear the mark of a difference that was not normal, that was not seen as normal" (Marta).

The "normative character" of the content of the poster was highlighted by a statement that showed a more systematized reflection: "This issue of difference, we mustn't think of placing it within the norm, but within the philosophy of difference" (Isabel).

After this initial characterization of difference, it could be seen that the interviewees brought not only their own representations to the discussion, but also "representations of

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[8] As Renato Ortiz points out (2007, p. 12 e 15): "Expectations are inverted. *The diverse is a synonym of wealth, untouchable equity*"; "The statement 'the diversity of peoples must be preserved' which you find used in a range of documents produced by domestic and international agencies, is not at all natural. On the contrary, we should be struck by its strangeness, because it is laden with an entirely new meaning. [...] In this semantic operation there is a redefinition of what would have been unthinkable in previous frameworks: *the diverse becomes a common good*" (our emphasis).

social representations" of difference: several said they presupposed but criticized the existence of a "trend to a hierarchy of differences", something which also appeared at other moments of the meeting, although not necessarily aligned with the targets of acceptance or refusal.

> ...this gradation, it ends up existing inside ourselves, because we see it like this: OK, working with someone who has other types of difference, who has a different skin color, who comes from a different culture, may be easier, maybe simpler than someone who I don't know what makes them tick, or how they think or act, how do you deal with someone like that? There was something demarcated there. Not talking about "difference", but talking about a specific difference. (Marisa)

> ... I was forbidden to talk about *orixás*, and about Afro-Brazilian religions ... but how can I talk about the Brazilian people without talking about that? I have to talk about Africa, but I can't talk about *candomblé* and *umbanda*, and we didn't even talk much about those things, we were mainly focusing on the archetypes of the *orixás*. (Marta)

Another level of hierarchization of differences in the school space was also highlighted by the participants: the issue of visibility. Differences of physical and mental capacity were more easily identified, according to them, as well as those that "disturb" the school.

> ... so I challenged myself to work with a class that had this deaf girl student, and then these issues got heavier and heavier, because there was that physical difference which was undeniable, inside the school. The thing that bothered me, before all of this, and when the girl was put into that class was: who (*sic*) are these differences? Is it only that deaf student who is the difference, or are all the students different? (Alice)

> ... I want to go back to what everyone was saying about the cognitive. That is the difference that appears often in private schools, for instance, it's a difference that bothers teachers, and bothers coordination, and bothers the school — students that give you trouble, who have cognitive problems, ADHD, all those acronyms, that give you trouble. (Tadeu)

Something else that struck us was the recurrent linking of difference to the issue of "prejudice", even before the moderator had located that discussion in the school space. In some cases difference and prejudice were even equated, as in the following statement: "You [moderator] asked how prejudice appears and how we deal with it" (Elisa). Actually the moderator had put the question as follows, without uttering the word "prejudice", but saying

"difference" instead: "In this scenario that you are all describing, how do you perceive difference, what types of difference strike you immediately?"

That was not the only moment when participants worked with that meaning, and – added to the analysis of other references to prejudice and discrimination in everyday school life, such as those we will reproduce below – this may be interpreted as an indication that the words are taken as synonyms because the issue of difference is so serious and arises so frequently in the daily life of schools.

> What we see is that prejudice appeared in two main forms: the way students address each other verbally was so aggressive, you're black, you're a negro, you had that in the municipal school, I didn't hear it in the communities, but I also heard it about religion too, so-and-so practices *macumba*, so-and-so is black, or gay, and this really stood out verbally, like a standard everyone internalized, the standard you see everywhere, it's in the students, and it's in us to a certain extent... There's also an issue of self-esteem, how students feel... Right, so however assertive, or aggressive, or whatever, they feel inferior, they don't expect much of themselves, they don't invest much, because they don't think they're going to make it. (continuation of Elisa, cited above)

> ... It goes straight to this idea of lack of ability, this concept of difference leads to the idea of lack of ability. (Marisa)

Thinking of difference in education, for many interviewees, means thinking of prejudice and discrimination, which lead to violence[9] and low expectations[10] in everyday school life. Another link between prejudice and difference came out in the report of an activity by Clara:

> ...so, everything was, like, well structured and planned so that all the activities would really lead to the discussion we wanted to have, which was the discussion about being black, and taking advantage of this issue of blackness to discuss differences, all right?, because it involves all the other discussions of prejudice, fat kids in the gym class...

Laclau proposes recognizing two simultaneous modes of building the social, through the logic of difference and through the logic of equivalence:

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[9] Which has been confirmed in recent studies such as those listed in Camacho (2000) and (Leite, 2008).

[10] The issue of expectation and its effects on teaching-learning processes has been addressed in a number of studies popularising the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education (Bressoux, 2003).

> ... affirmation of particularity [...] whose only ties to other particularities are differential (as we have seen: without positive terms, but only differential ones), or by means of a partial claudication of particularity, highlighting what all particularities have – equivalently – in common. (2005, p. 103-104)

The latter – equivalence – presupposes "the drawing of an antagonistic frontier". This proposal signals the possibility of a counterposition to the frequently denounced tendency towards the fragmentation of social movements for the recognition and rights of differences. Prejudice and discrimination, according to the quote selected, may constitute the antagonistic frontier that will somehow bring together the "different differences".

In several utterances an "epistemological dimension" can also be seen to be attributed to the problem of cultural difference:

> I think that we teachers have a great deal of knowledge and so on, but I think that we're also in a constant learning process, and we have to be open all the time to receive information, but also to exchange experiences... I think that the students also have a lot to give us, don't they? So this exchange is extremely important. (Teresa)

> ...they learn from others outside the classroom, and very often what they learn and bring into the classroom is not formal knowledge, it's not institutionalized, it's not knowledge, but it is other types of knowledge. (Alice)

As with the discussion of the issues of prejudice, this was a recurrent theme – except that it was located in distinct discoursal contextualizations: while prejudice was mainly referred to in accounts of pedagogical activities or in situations that occurred in the school space, the alternative types of knowledge were mentioned through a generic reference, not linking back to specific moments of the daily life of schools. This may reveal an approach to such issues which is more theoretical than practical: although this discussion is relatively consolidated in the educational environment – Paulo Freire addressed the topic early on in his work – the incorporation of types of knowledge other than that traditionally chosen as legitimate by the school still seems far-removed from more usual school practices.

Other movements to establish significations were less frequent and less well developed in the interactions, although they were present in the debate: the "essentialization of difference" and "cultural hybridization".

...academia is still very… it sins by still being very far removed from practice. I think this happens, and today you have this law which makes it compulsory to teach African history, the history of the descendants of Africans, and today you have this issue of the Afro-Brazilians... I have African and Brazilian friends who are researchers, who think that Afro-Brazilian means people who are actually the descendants of Africans. (Marta)

In this view, cultural identification is based on blood ties. It is worth pointing out that no other statements are recorded where one can identify so clearly this signification of an essentialist line, nor was there any explicit divergence from the utterance transcribed above or clear understanding of cultural identity and/or belonging, which is marked by fragmentation, a hybridization and multiplicity (Hall, 2003a) and that could be counterpoised to this perspective. Indirectly, however, cultural identification was explored, although not in these terms, or as a counter-argument to the last statement.

You [in a dialogue with Clara] posed a question that left me a little... You said: in my school everyone is black. And I was thinking: is this in your eyes or in their eyes? Because I went to work at Maré, about four years ago [...] So I decided to do a project on identity, I thought I knew who I was, but I didn't know who my students were, and in this project − I work with art education − I started the educational part with self portraits, working a bit on the subject of the peoples who make up Brazil, and so we started with self portraits, and everyone did their self-portrait with fair hair... This boy wasn't one of them. So I realized very strongly that nobody saw themselves as black, and that being black was bad and wearing your hair up − the girls all said that I was wearing my hair up, and I said my hair sticks up, and I like wearing it up. I did *n* activities so that they could understand where this came from, wearing your hair up, what it means to have kinky hair, origins and stuff, because there at Maré there are a lot of people from the north-east of Brazil, and we did some profound work about the north-east, and gradually the self portraits started to match how the students really are. The brown pencils started coming out of the pencil cases. (Marta)

...Caroline learned Libras (Brazilian sign language) in the first grade with a deaf teacher, and she started seeing herself as deaf, because there was a deaf adult accompanying her, who has a deaf culture. (Alice)

In the quote by the first teacher, the students' identity is narrated as relational and procedural: she asks who it is that determines identity – "is this in your eyes or in their eyes?"; she doesn't define it by an ethnic or racial phenotype – "I didn't know who my students were": nor does she perceive it as a fixed identity, since she intentionally attempts to

intervene in its constitution. In the other example, the teacher Alice once again makes explicit the relational dimension of this process: Caroline's identification of herself as deaf depended on her interaction with a deaf adult.

As to cultural hybridization[11], one of the participants gave an example – albeit without using this terminology – of a dance activity that included the question of religion:

> ...and I had a friend who was a candomblé priest (*pai-de-santo*) and he had been a pai-de-santo for fourteen years, and then he gave up being a pai-de-santo just like that, and became a Jehovah's Witness. So what was clear for me was that when he became a Jehovah's Witness he didn't just throw out all the baggage that he had brought from fourteen years of candomblé, but he was dealing with all of that know-how, with that different, differentiated type of knowledge... He connected all of that to aspects of nature: the river, the sea, the wind, the thunder – and I thought that was interesting. (Teresa)

However, this statement was made in the final moments of the meeting, and there is no recording of anyone developing it further. Nonetheless, we should be cautious in drawing conclusions from the fact that this and other arguments were not developed further: it is important to point out that the recurrence of certain articulations and meanings ascribed to the word "difference" certainly places special attention on such movements in signification; however, this does not mean that what was unique and found no similar repercussion was irrelevant. The very dynamics of this focus group – with a time limit and a relatively high number of participants – may have restricted the possibility of certain issues being discussed.

It should be noted, therefore, that essentialist concepts of belonging and cultural identification emerged simultaneously with the recognition of their unstable and hybrid nature, without the conflict between these perspectives being confronted explicitly.

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[11] As Garcia Canclini (2006) puts it: "a preliminary definition: *I understand sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, that existed separately, come together to generate new structures, objects and practices, as hybridisation*" (p. 19). The driving force behind this movement is the need for the "reconversion" of an existing heritage – "a factory, a professional training, a body of knowledge and practices" (p. 22) – within new sociocultural contexts.

DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY

One of the interests of the focus group was to explore participants' representations of the relationship between difference and inequality. In the previous individual interviews, understanding of the synonymy prevailed, and there was greater emphasis given to questions of inequality than to issues of cultural difference, which raised questions within Gecec: why were we asking about cultural difference and the teachers we interviewed answering about inequality? The same semantic slippage was identified within the focus group; however, in this case, it was possible to broaden the discussion and build some clues as to its interpretation.

A preliminary elucidation has to do with Gecec's own understanding of this relationship, which can be summed up in the well-known formulation by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1997, p. 97): "people and social groups have the right to be equal when difference makes them inferior, and the right to be different when equality distorts their true nature. This is known to be a very difficult imperative to attain and to maintain".

The surveys we have conducted arise from the need to question standardization in general, which goes toward making the different socio-educational practices, and to combat the inequality, the prejudices and the discrimination that strongly characterize society and schools. It is about acknowledging the basic rights of all while remembering that these "all" are not "the same": valuing their differences is inherent to our conception of equality. However, this is undoubtedly a terrain fraught with difficulties and "traps"[12]. One of the traps is the possibility of taking inequality for granted within the discourse of difference. However, by highlighting issues of power that pervade the cultural dimension of education and by advocating intercultural dialogue, we assert that it is possible to meet these difficulties and traps head-on.

> The awareness of the mechanisms of power that pervade cultural relations is another characteristic of this perspective. Cultural relations are not idyllic relations, they are not romantic relations, they are built in history, and are therefore highly charged with questions of power, fraught with strongly hierarchical relations, and marked by the prejudice and discrimination of certain groups. (CANDAU, 2008, p. 23)

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[12] We are referring to the arguments of Antônio Flávio Pierucci (1999), in his book *Ciladas da diferença*, (" The Traps of Difference ") which is quoted in the epigraph.

In several of the statements made in the focus group it was clear that the meaning we attribute to the expression 'cultural difference' was familiar to the participants. However, only three teachers kept to this line of signification throughout the discussion. The others switched back and forth between the meaning of inequality, which makes the opening question ("why were we asking about cultural difference and the teachers we interviewed answering about inequality?") even more intriguing, since we were engaged in a dialogue with a group of professionals whose sensitivity and commitment in issues of cultural difference were explicit.

The problematic equation of difference versus inequality was addressed by one of the teachers without specific elicitation by the mediator, providing the first clues of a possible interpretation of the motivations behind this semantic overlapping:

> I worked with them in an activity about social action and voluntary action, about what difference and inequality meant within the school. So they produced a text about what produces the differences between them. They couldn't distinguish difference from inequality very well, in this case perhaps because of their age—13, 14. What appeared most strongly was that teachers were bringing difference into the classroom to value certain qualities the students had, and devalue other qualities, in other words producing inequality through difference. (Tadeu)

It is interesting to see that in the only teaching activity that addressed the relationship between difference and inequality, the students had produced an important key to understanding the semantic slippage that we are now questioning: the school itself often turns cultural differences into inequalities.

Albeit not made explicit in so many words, there were several reports of school situations that could be described as personal and institutional movements to produce inequalities from cultural differences.

> What we ought to be discussing is what is this curriculum that we have in schools and that these kids probably aren't in 4, 64, or 710[13], which are the largest ones and they can't, they haven't... the way I see it is they don't have the key to open a box when they arrive at school [...] (Clara)

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[13] This is a reference to what another participant said, mentioning their school's tradition of putting students into groups by performance and/or age, and numbering the classes in this way.

> And then there's the social issue. In my case we see it a lot, this social question, this financial issue. You have this kid who lives in an at-risk community and has a family... the parents had been teenage parents… and on the other hand you have someone whose family is not dysfunctional, who has a better financial situation and can fit in better in this system which also has a pattern. You wonder about it but you don't have an answer for it. (Elisa)

The language of school, the curriculum contents, the prejudices which lead to low self-esteem and low expectations among students and teachers were mentioned as products of the school that, in our view, lead to the conversion of difference into inequality and justify the identification between difference and inequality by the teachers.

It is also clear that these products are not strictly local, rather they correspond to broader values and adjustments within society: in other words, society often informs the school that "difference is inequality".

> So all the study centers were planned and this topic was linked to the project, a lot of debate, a lot of discussion ... We began by carrying out work on identity, like you were saying about the self-portrait, the ID card, and the first logo was to make an animated *gif*. We have a school blog and we wanted to put all the people in the school looking out from the drawing, so we took the students, the staff, the director, the students' parents, and the only eyes that were winking were those of black people. What was funny was that students thought the school lunch lady was black, but that the director, who is actually black, was not black. So you realize that because she was the director of the school she couldn't possibly be black ... (Clara)

The issue of school performance was also a highlight and seems likewise to bear the mark of social impositions. Several comments referred back to inequalities of cognitive ability being identified as difference, reminding us of the controversial declaration by British sociologist Basil Bernstein:

> If class structures exist, this means that there is necessarily an unequal distribution of material and symbolic possibilities. But this does not mean that individuals suffer a deficit with regard to cultural possibilities. Objectively, if we have class, we have deficit, and it makes no sense to think about that in any other way. (1998, p.86)

Indeed, if we have class, we have inequality, but it makes a lot of sense to think that society is not monolithic and that school does not need to reproduce these inequalities, or at

least does not need to do it continuously. Even in contexts where there is political commitment to the rights of difference, the strength of social significations and hierarchizations in many cases very likely outweighs such efforts at transformation. As to the possibilities of learning, it has to be acknowledged that the historical option of schools for lettered culture – in our view unquestionable in the sociocultural context in which we live – imposes some level of inequality upon students from social backgrounds in which orality is more present than written expression. However, the focus group participants showed that the institution of school does not always remain passive in the face of such processes: the school may also reverse the processes of turning difference into inequality. The teacher Clara tells us about the empowerment of those who are different/unequal through pedagogical actions within the space of the school:

> We made murals with portraits of everyone: teachers, students, employees, the dance itself ... Then there was a lot of discussion among the teachers who were saying: why do you say that black is beautiful and why don't you say that white is beautiful or that Indians are beautiful? Then I said: nobody needs to be told that white is beautiful, that's what everyone says the whole time, white is beautiful even in the minds of black people, because that's how it is ... So the idea really was to be provocative.

The State has a role to play, as in the enactment of Law 10,639[14], which made the teaching of the history of Africa and of Afro-Brazilian culture compulsory, as teachers Isabel and Marta said. However, addressing the meanings ascribed to the terms difference and inequality can be very problematic.

> I work in the Jardim Gramacho neighborhood and the situation there is totally different because social issues are far worse there than where I live... It's me who is different there, I sometimes think, because I sometimes come face-to-face with certain things... What's normal for them, for me sometimes the work is unimaginable... I mean, how can this be? For example, some students don't have a toilet at home, no flush, or when they do, their toilet is a hole in the ground. (Glória)

In this case, it is not an issue of cultural difference in our view, but one of cruel inequality. We all have the right to basic sanitation, we all have the right to housing and

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[14] It was replaced in 2008 by Law number 11,645, which also made it compulsory to teach the history of the indigenous peoples and their cultural traditions.

health. The cultural constructions of the sections of the population mentioned above provide a means of survival that show their creative capacity and their worth, but they cannot be accepted as natural. This is an example of situations of inequality that have been reported in terms of difference – differences that humiliate, and against which we adopt a contrary posture, and believe that it would be more appropriate to call them inequality.

FINAL REMARKS

The first aspect we would like to stress is that staging this focus group was in fact extremely productive within the general objective of the study. The richness of the interaction dynamic between participants, while simultaneously proving the suitability of the criterion for selecting the teachers – since they all produced significant content and showed sensitivity regarding the issues put forward – also allowed us to go into greater depth regarding the discussions that occurred than had been possible in the individual interviews. In several passages it can be seen that the moderator's suggested direction faded into the background because of the interplay arising among the interviewees.

As to the meanings given by the teachers we interviewed to the expression "difference", what drew our attention was its recurrent association with "prejudice" and "discrimination", really setting up a synonymy between these terms in many cases. We interpreted these shifts in meaning as symptomatic of how often and how seriously the issue of difference emerges in everyday school life, which once again reinforces our conviction of the need to work on this controversy, both during teacher training and during everyday school life.

One signification was notable by its absence: there was a surprising silence about individual psychological differences in the rate at which students learn, a characteristic emphasis given by the *escolanovista* (New School) tendency that has been acknowledged to have exercised such an influence on Brazilian pedagogical thinking and practice. The recent massive extension of teaching may have given rise to so many and such large sociocultural issues that psychological approaches may be giving way to a predominance of sociological emphases.

With further regard to the discussion of the meanings handled by the focus group participants concerning the word "difference", we saw that on several occasions a semantic slippage occurred bringing it closer to the content that Gecec insists on identifying as

"inequality". Analysis of the utterances where this signification appeared led us to conclude that this slippage corresponds to the trend in society and school to turn difference into inequality by imposing monocultural modes, values and codes. Although diversity is an emerging social value (ORTIZ, 2007), inequality, which is structural in the social arrangement in which we live, often outweighs an assertion of rights to difference in several aspects of the collectivities into which we organize ourselves. However, we bring to a conclusion this reflection by optimistically highlighting the several examples where the teachers interviewed reminded us of the possibilities of working through the school itself to reverse structural pressures for inequality and for cultural homogeneity.

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