The Struggle for Black Education in Salvador

By C. Darius Gordon

It's been 16 years, and you're still making plans for implementation?!” Daniela, a professor at the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, exclaims as she opens the first round of discussion. It is early August 2019, and I am at the regional kick-off for enforcing Federal Law 10,639/03, the mandate that schools teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. The approximately 100 other participants of this Thursday morning townhall, predominately Black women, nod their heads and murmur in agreement. One after another, the people in the room express their frustrations. Tired of waiting for the process to finance the course. Due to the delayed decision and fiscal constraints, the course was suspended another year. Eventually, in conjunction with UNEB and UFBA, Boaventura hosted the specialization course with CEAO from March to December of 1986.

In 1984, the MNU chapter in Salvador began gathering signatures in support of a petition to the Bahia State Secretary of Education, Edivaldo Boaventura. They demanded that he implement legislation that would include teaching “Introduction to African Studies” in primary and secondary school as part of the formal school curriculum. They argued that the Eurocentric schooling of Brazilian education was a form of violence enacted upon Black youth, leading especially to lowered self-esteem and a poor sense of identity. To support this call for reform, they revived a similar request made by the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais (CEAO, Center for Afro-Oriental Studies) just one year prior. After much delay, on June 10, 1985, Boaventura approved the implementation of their request with Municipal Ordinance No. 6068, which allowed for the teaching of African Studies in all state schools.

To oversee this process, the Office of the Secretary of Education first created a commission made up of three representatives from Black organizations and three members of CEAO. The commission met with a branch of the Secretary of Education, the State Counsel of Education, and Gerência de Curriculos (GECIN, Curriculum Management) in order to determine a path for implementation. This constellation of actors came to the consensus that teachers would need a “refresher course” to be prepared to teach the specialized content of African Studies. All parties agreed that this specialization course would be taught by CEAO to current schoolteachers in the discipline of Human Sciences, to teachers at non-state community schools, and to militantes working in the area of education. The content of the course would be determined according to criteria established by CEAO and other Black community organizations.

Shortly after these decisions were made, the Secretary’s office also created an advisory council for African Studies that was appointed by and responded directly to Boaventura. The MNU righteously remarked in one of their newsletters that they had been cut out of the process. Excluded from both oversight and daily operations regarding the implementation of African Studies, the catalysts for the reform had been dropped from the process almost entirely.

The teacher specialization course was planned to begin in March 1985, in order prepare educators to start teaching African Studies by February 1986, the start of the academic year in the southern hemisphere. However, there was yet another delay: no institution was willing to fund the course. Several months passed, and finally, the Universidade do Estado da Bahia (UNEB) agreed to finance the course. Due to the delayed decision and fiscal constraints, the course was suspended another year. Eventually, in conjunction with UNEB and UFBA, Boaventura hosted the specialization course with CEAO from March to December of 1986.

In early 1987, with the teachers prepared, it seemed that Introduction to African Studies would finally make its way into the schools. The MNU was eager to ensure the successful implementation but had been edged out of the process early on, so they called for a meeting with Boaventura. They were worried because they hadn’t heard any news about the implementation process. After several public hearings that involved the Secretary of Education, community organizations, school leaders, and members of the advisory council, six high schools volunteered to implement Introduction to African Studies during the 1987 school year.

While it is unclear whether these schools would have volunteered without the encouragement and support of the MNU, the public hearings certainly reanimated the possibilities for African Studies in the public schools.

By the spring of 1988, nearly one year after the first implementation of Introduction to African Studies, a total...
of nine schools in Salvador had begun teaching the subject. Additionally, many more school directors throughout the state requested that their own educators be allowed to teach the course. In response to these requests, Boaventura claimed that there weren’t enough specialized teachers.

According to Ana Cézia da Silva, in the April 1988 issue of Nêgo, this assertion was untrue. Of the 35 teachers who took the initial 420-hour course: only 10 teachers were actually employed in schools, 10 others didn’t teach in the discipline of Human Sciences, and the rest simply weren’t state-certified schoolteachers. She also observed that of the five militantes who took the initial 420-hour course: only 10 teachers were actually employed in schools, 10 others didn’t teach in the discipline of Human Sciences, and the rest simply weren’t state-certified schoolteachers. In her first years in office, she also failed to support municipalities outside of the capital, Salvador, that sought to incorporate African Studies into their curriculum. Many teachers had to use their own free time outside of class or vacation/medical leave to meet up and train themselves without institutional support.

Those schools that did implement African Studies in these early years faced many challenges, as well. Lack of material resources, antagonistic colleagues, and no direction from school administration or the Secretary of Education were all common struggles as the program entered its third year.

Throughout those first two years of implementation, MNU and other community organizations in Salvador. It is also likely that the struggle wanes at this moment because, like many Black political organizations, the MNU’s efforts begin to shift toward national organizing after the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1988.

By the 1990s, information about identities and ethnic relations, especially in history, began to appear in the federal curriculum standards issued by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and in 2003, President Lula signed Federal Law 10,639, requiring all public and private schools to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. These federal policies would not have been possible without the work of Black Movements, such as the MNU and other community organizations in Salvador. However, as my opening vignette demonstrates, these governmental promises remain unmet in the ongoing struggle for Black education.

This brief story reveals a pattern in Black educational organizing in Brazil: a pattern of promises followed by state neglect and displaced responsibility. Black activists have been and still are caught in a tension between demanding their right to a quality education in a supposedly democratic society and the knowledge that schooling serves the state’s reliance on white supremacist capitalism. As I consider how this historical legacy of challenging anti-Black schooling haunts the present, I return to da Silva’s question: are Black educational activists in Brazil still just demanding the devil say mass?

C. Darius Gordon is a Ph.D. student in the Critical Studies of Race, Class, and Gender at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education. They study 20th-century Black thought, activism, and education throughout the African Diaspora.

Photo courtesy of MNU Salvador/@ermeval. Brazilian students participate in a pilot program that supports nutrition, transportation, and extracurricular activities, July 2017.