



Photo by Carlos Ramalheira

A Brazilian classroom.

## BRAZIL

## 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 50 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 government to provide adequate resources for their predominately Black schools, many of them were looking for an alternative. These activists did not all agree on

what to do next, but in that meeting, an implicit yet unanimous vote was cast: it was time to re-strategize.

Education has long been central to the work of Brazilian Black Movements and continues to be one of the most important fields for action. Studies show that Black community organizers and *militantes* (activists) throughout Brazil identified the struggle for the implementation of Federal Law 10,639/03 as the second most urgent struggle of the movement, just after the fight against police violence. This struggle for formal curricular representation that presents Black history and culture more fully and accurately dates back at least to the 1930s, when the first Black political party in Brazil, the Frente Negra Brasileira (Brazilian Black Front), critiqued school textbook content. I’ve seen firsthand how the longevity of

this particular battle has led to frustration for activists in Salvador da Bahia. Reflecting on this current moment of frustration and thinking back along the legacy of Black educational activism in Salvador, the words of Brazilian activist Ana Célia da Silva come to mind. In April 1988, after years of engaging in a curricular campaign for K-12 African Studies, she asks, “*Estamos querendo exigir que o diabo reze missa? Are we trying to demand that the devil say mass?*”

From June to August 2020, I conducted research in online archives in order to understand the educational battles fought by Brazilian Black Movements in Salvador since the 1970s. By reading newspapers from the independent Black press in Salvador, such as *Nêgo* and *Jornal do MNU*, I sought to historically situate the present-day battles for educational access, opportunity, and self-determination. This project recounts the struggle for formal curricular reform in the late 1980s. It is part of my broader work on Black educational struggle throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On June 18, 1978, the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU, Unified Black Movement) solidified themselves as a national organization with their Carta de Princípios, a platform that named improving Black education as a principal struggle. The MNU in Bahia was very active in the field of education since its inception and was one of the first chapters to propose that African and Afro-Brazilian content be introduced into public schools, nearly 20 years before the federal mandate.

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 Currículos (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 to 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 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

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An MNU rally in Salvador da Bahia celebrating 40 years of the movement, July 2018.

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 Célia 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 specialization course, only two were able to complete it because the meetings were held during the workday. There were enough educators, da Silva argued, the state just refused to recognize them as such.

Not only were there already plenty of educators, but the possibilities for expansion could have been vastly improved if the MNU's concerns had been taken seriously. In early 1988, the MNU had anticipated high demand from the schools and had requested that the Secretary order

another iteration of the teacher specialization course. During a long waiting period, which felt more like neglect, da Silva wrote in the same Spring issue of *Nêgo* that "as the main stakeholders and those responsible for the [initial] implementation of the discipline, we hope that we will not be once again removed from the process." She noted that there were plenty of militantes capable of teaching the discipline, but they did not have university degrees. What these activists do have that many of the current official schoolteachers do not, she explained, is an understanding of race and racism in Brazil, an experiential knowledge unrecognized by the state. She recommended that these militantes be contracted to teach African Studies for the schools. Her recommendations were ignored.

After two years of implementation in nine different high schools, the Secretary of Education assumed new leadership under Professora Maria Augusta Rosa Hochoa, the first woman to serve as the Secretary of Education for the State of Bahia. Unfortunately, it seemed as though many of the gains made during Boaventura's term were lost. Hochoa failed to prioritize African Studies and instead implemented teacher specialization courses on other

topics. 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 continued to hold and participate in many more public hearings between the Secretary's Office and the community. In 1988, Hochoa signed an agreement to finally begin another teacher specialization course for African Studies in 1989. This promise went unmet, but the MNU remained committed to the uphill battle for curriculum reform. In the June 1989 issue of *Nêgo*, they acknowledged that Black community organizers were dedicated to these

struggles because they knew that "the goal of [African Studies], that of developing the self-esteem, personal identity, and the respect for differences, are in disagreement with the objectives of the ideologies of whitening and inferiorizing that the school promotes."

As a result of this continued state neglect, by 1989, more than five years after the initial MNU campaign, all of the schools had abandoned the teaching of African Studies, with the exception of one school: Escola Cidade de Curitiba. This is where the story, seems to run cold; this brief rise and fall of educational struggle in Salvador disappears from the MNU's newspapers. It's possible that there are still more archival materials, not-yet digitized, that would expand this story. 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 20<sup>th</sup>-century Black thought, activism, and education throughout the African Diaspora.

Brazilian students participate in a pilot program that supports nutrition, transportation, and extracurricular activities, July 2017.



Photo by Pilar Pedreira/Agência Senado.