

ARTICLE

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SCHOOL CULTURE: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF JOÃO PESSOA¹Charya Charlotte Bezerra Advíncula¹Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1351-3695>.<charya.advincula@ifpb.edu.br>Chyara Charlotte Bezerra Advíncula²Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6571-3656>.<chyara.advincula@ifpb.edu.br>Johnatan Ferreira Marques do Vale³Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3949-7531>johnatandovale@gmail.com¹ Instituto Federal de Educação Ciência e Tecnologia da Paraíba (IFPB), João Pessoa/PB, Brasil.² Instituto Federal de Educação Ciência e Tecnologia da Paraíba (IFPB), Princesa Isabel/PB, Brasil.³ Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Natal/RN, Brasil.**Abstract**

This article examines the challenges faced by a Religious Education teacher in a public school located in a low-income neighborhood of João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil, in 2024, while implementing principles established by Brazilian educational legislation. The study focuses on Article 33 of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB), which requires Religious Education to be taught in a non-proselytizing and non-denominational manner, as well as on Laws N°. 10.639/2003 and N°. 11.645/2008, which mandate the inclusion of the historical, cultural, social, and religious contributions of Black and Indigenous peoples in Basic Education. The article first presents a historical overview of Religious Education in Brazil and discusses the training of teachers working in this field, highlighting the limited availability of specialized teacher education programs and the precarious nature of professional preparation. It then develops a case study based on the experiences of the teacher-researcher, emphasizing the difficulties encountered in promoting religious diversity and citizenship education within the school environment. The research adopted a school ethnography approach, drawing on Pereira (2017), Mattos (2006), and Cipiniuk (2014) to investigate everyday school practices, institutional dynamics, and emerging conflicts. Field observations were conducted between March and July 2024. The findings reveal strategies employed by

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pedagogical coordinators, school administrators, and classroom assistants to discredit, restrict, or neutralize discussions related to religious diversity, exposing tensions between legal requirements and educational practices in the school context.

Keywords: Religious Education; School Culture; Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous History and Culture.

O ENSINO RELIGIOSO E A CULTURA ESCOLAR: DESAFIOS E PERSPECTIVAS EM UMA ESCOLA PÚBLICA DA PERIFERIA DE JOÃO PESSOA

Resumo

Este artigo analisa as dificuldades enfrentadas por um professor de Ensino Religioso em uma escola pública periférica de João Pessoa (PB), no ano de 2024, para implementar princípios previstos na legislação educacional brasileira. O estudo concentra-se especialmente no Artigo 33 da Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB), que determina a oferta do Ensino Religioso sem caráter proselitista ou confessional, bem como nas Leis nº 10.639/2003 e nº 11.645/2008, que tornam obrigatória a abordagem das contribuições históricas, culturais, sociais e religiosas das populações negras e indígenas na Educação Básica. Inicialmente, o trabalho apresenta um panorama histórico da disciplina de Ensino Religioso no Brasil e discute a formação dos docentes que atuam nessa área, evidenciando a precariedade da profissionalização e as limitações da oferta de formação inicial específica. Em seguida, desenvolve um relato de caso baseado na experiência do professor pesquisador, destacando os obstáculos encontrados no cotidiano escolar para a efetivação de práticas pedagógicas voltadas à diversidade religiosa e à formação cidadã dos estudantes. A pesquisa foi realizada por meio da etnografia escolar, conforme as contribuições de Pereira (2017), Mattos (2006) e Cipiniuk (2014), buscando compreender o cotidiano escolar, as práticas institucionais e os conflitos presentes no ambiente educativo. As observações ocorreram entre março e julho de 2024. Os resultados revelam estratégias adotadas pela coordenação pedagógica, direção e auxiliares de sala para desqualificar, inviabilizar ou neutralizar abordagens relacionadas à diversidade religiosa, evidenciando tensões entre as determinações legais e as práticas efetivamente desenvolvidas no contexto escolar.

Palavras-Chave: Ensino Religioso; Cultura Escolar; História e Cultura Afro-brasileira e indígena.

LA ENSEÑANZA RELIGIOSA Y LA CULTURA ESCOLAR: DESAFÍOS Y PERSPECTIVAS EN UNA ESCUELA PÚBLICA DE LA PERIFERIA DE JOÃO PESSOA

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las dificultades enfrentadas por un profesor de Educación Religiosa en una escuela pública de un barrio periférico de João Pessoa (PB), Brasil, durante el año 2024, para implementar los principios establecidos por la legislación educativa brasileña. El estudio se centra en el Artículo 33 de la Ley de Directrices y Bases de la Educación Nacional (LDB), que establece una Educación Religiosa no confesional y libre de proselitismo, así como en

las Leyes n.º 10.639/2003 y n.º 11.645/2008, que exigen la inclusión de las contribuciones históricas, culturales, sociales y religiosas de las poblaciones negras e indígenas en la Educación Básica. Inicialmente, el trabajo presenta una revisión histórica de la Educación Religiosa en Brasil y analiza la formación de los docentes del área, destacando las limitaciones de la oferta de formación inicial y la fragilidad de su profesionalización. Posteriormente, desarrolla un estudio de caso basado en la experiencia del profesor-investigador, enfatizando los obstáculos encontrados para promover la diversidad religiosa y la formación ciudadana de los estudiantes. La investigación se realizó mediante la etnografía escolar, con base en Pereira (2017), Mattos (2006) y Cipiniuk (2014), para comprender las prácticas institucionales y los conflictos presentes en el entorno educativo. Los resultados evidencian estrategias adoptadas por la coordinación pedagógica, la dirección escolar y los auxiliares de aula para desacreditar o neutralizar enfoques relacionados con la diversidad religiosa, revelando tensiones entre las disposiciones legales y las prácticas escolares efectivamente desarrolladas.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza Religiosa; Cultura Escolar; Historia y Cultura Afrobrasileña e Indígena.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB -*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* – Law 9.394/96) brought a series of transformations in Brazilian school curriculum, directly impacting daily school life and the traditional pedagogical practices of many public schools.

Historically, religious education has always been present in the country's schools, given that the first Brazilian schools were maintained by Christian religious orders that arrived in the national territory during the colonization process. However, as a specific subject in contemporary schools, religious education was institutionalized in the 1930s; it was subsequently ratified as a mandatory offering by the 1988 Federal Constitution and the LDB, and further consolidated by the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), which recognizes it as a distinct field of knowledge within Elementary Education.

As a curricular component, the LDB, in Article 33, defines Religious Education as a subject that must be offered, though enrollment is optional. It ensures respect for Brazil's cultural and religious diversity and prohibits any form of proselytism (Brazil, 1996). In other words, Religious Education should not be used as a tool for conversion or the promotion of specific beliefs, but rather as a space for reflection on the plurality of religious expressions and their associated cultural values.

Given Brazil's rich cultural diversity and the significant historical contributions of African and Indigenous peoples to the formation of its society, Laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08 were enacted to mandate the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history and culture in the basic education curriculum. Law 10.639/03 requires the teaching of the history of Africa and African peoples, the struggles of Black people in Brazil, Black Brazilian culture, and Black people's participation in the country's social, economic, and political

formation (Brazil, 2003). Law 11.645/08 expands this scope by also recognizing the importance of Indigenous peoples in shaping national identity.

Such laws represent an advance at the formal and legal levels, as they acknowledge the role of Black and Indigenous peoples in the formation of the national society. Consequently, there is an appreciation of African-derived religions and Indigenous religious traditions. However, these sacred spheres still face strong stigma and intolerance in various social and institutional contexts. Compliance with these laws is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical commitment to appreciating diversity and fighting against religious prejudice.

In this context, the João Pessoa Department of Education, together with Alpargatas Institute and the Institute for Social Co-responsibility, has been conducting training sessions for teachers in the municipal public school system. The aim is to provide the theoretical and methodological foundations for the effective implementation of Laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08 within the school curriculum. These training sessions prioritize teachers in the fields of Arts, History, and Religious Education through thematic workshops, one focusing on Black culture and the other on Indigenous culture, each lasting eight hours.

Participants are encouraged to create collaborative, interdisciplinary projects that integrate other fields of knowledge, including Mathematics and Science. Schools receive financial support from the Alpargatas Institute to implement these initiatives, which culminate in a public exhibition during Black Consciousness Week. This initiative reflects the commitment of the City Government and partner institutions to implement legislation and to develop teaching practices that value Brazilian cultural diversity.

BUILDING LAWS AND DWINDLING OFFERINGS: THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ACROSS THE NATIONAL TERRITORY

Although Religious Education has been a mandatory subject since 1997 (Brazil, 1997), it still faces serious challenges that hinder its full implementation. The Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB) was amended by Law 9.475/97, which redefined how this curricular component is offered, establishing that public authorities are responsible for hiring properly licensed teachers to instruct the subject.

Before this modification, Religious Education was taught in schools on a confessional basis, at no cost to the State, and often linked to religious institutions that voluntarily provided the instruction. The amendment introduced by Law 9.475/97 marked a substantial shift: Religious Education was recognized as an integral part of the school curriculum, distinct from religious indoctrination and guided by principles of secularism, pluralism, and respect for religious diversity.

Art. 33. Religious education, elective enrollment, constitutes a subject within the regular schedules of public elementary schools; it is offered at no cost to the

public treasury, in accordance with the preferences expressed by students or their guardians, based on:

I – Confessional, in accordance with the religious choice of the student or their guardian, taught by teachers or religious instructors trained and accredited by the respective churches or religious entities; or

II – Interconfessional, resulting from an agreement among the various religious entities, which shall be responsible for developing the respective curriculum (Brazil, 1996).

In 1997, it was read as:

Art. 33. Religious education, elective enrollment, is an integral part of a citizen's basic education and constitutes a subject within the regular schedules of public elementary schools, ensuring respect for Brazil's cultural and religious diversity, with any forms of proselytism prohibited (Text provided by Law 9.475 of July 22, 1997) (Brazil, 1990).

Religious Education is recognized as a distinct field of knowledge and is included in the LDB as an integral part of the school curriculum. However, initial education systems were not required to develop a curriculum for this subject and instead delegated this task to the school community, whether internal or external. This inconsistency was addressed in 1997 with the enactment of Law 9,475, which amended the LDB to mandate that the provision of Religious Education became a responsibility of public authorities. However, this change highlighted a new issue: the need for training educators who would teach Religious Education. The LDB establishes that the initial training of Basic Education teachers must occur in degree programs specific to their area of knowledge.

Examining the historical trajectory of this field reveals that the first higher education programs in the Science of Religion in Brazil emerged in the 1970s in the South and Southeast regions, at institutions such as the Pontifical Catholic Universities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Rio Grande do Sul (Marques & Rocha, 2017). According to the authors, these programs were strongly influenced by a confessional approach, predominantly Catholic, and to a lesser extent, Protestant.

Regarding Religious Studies as a field of knowledge, the starting point in Brazil was the arrival of scholars specializing in the sociology and anthropology of religion, such as Lévi-Strauss and Roger Bastide, who began teaching at the University of São Paulo (USP) (Idem, 2017). The field's development in the country began with these professors, who were affiliated with social science programs. It subsequently expanded to other public institutions, although it was initially confined to graduate programs.

Degree programs in Religious Studies teacher education were offered by public and private higher education institutions from 2019, following the promulgation of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Religious Studies Teacher Education Programs, established by Resolution 5/CNE/CP of December 28, 2018 (Brazil, 1988).

Before this regulation, there were isolated, unsuccessful attempts to offer specific training for Religious Education teachers in basic education. One example is the proposal by the Curitiba Student Assistance Association, which sought authorization to offer

a degree program in Religious Studies at the School of Religious Studies and Theology in Curitiba (PR). The National Council of Education, however, denied the request, citing the proselytizing nature of the institution's courses (Brazil, 1999).

This raises the question: how did teacher training for Religious Education in Brazilian education systems unfold over nearly three decades without a formal definition of specific training requirements? To understand this historical gap, we will examine data regarding teacher training before 2018 regulations, based on the work of Souza (2013), who conducted a historical survey of continuing education in the field.

In 1996, Souza (2013) noticed the existence, within the national territory, of teaching degree programs in Religious Studies, although their availability did not extend to all regions of the country, being instead concentrated in specific areas. According to Souza (2013), in 2013, 19 years after the enactment of the LDB, there were 19 programs in Religious Studies operating in Brazil. The regional distribution showed eight institutions in the South, six in the Southeast, four in the Northeast, and one in the North.

According to 2025 data from the Ministry of Education's National Registry of Higher Education Institutions², the country has 31 institutions offering a teaching degree program in Religious Studies, eight public and twenty-three private. Among the public institutions, one is located in the Southeast region, three in the Northeast, two in the North, and two in the South. Only one public institution offers the program through distance learning.

Most of the current degree programs in Religious Studies Education were from the private sector, particularly via distance learning. Only nine of the 23 private institutions offer the program in an in-person format, all located in the South and Southeast regions. The remaining 14 private institutions offer the program via distance learning, with only one of them based in the Northeast region.

Although the offer of initial training for teachers in this area has expanded significantly, a regional concentration persists, especially in the South and Southeast regions. Concerning the free offer, the discrepancy is even greater, since not all regions of the country are covered by public institutions that offer the degree.

The figures also show that, in the 12 years following the enactment of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Religious Studies Teacher Training Programs, there was an approximately 60% increase in the availability of these courses. The private sector accounted for 74% of this growth, concentrating primarily on distance learning, while public institutions accounted for 26%, almost entirely in the in-person format.

A comparison of the 2013 scenario with that of 2025, based on data from Souza (2013), highlights a significant expansion of initial teacher training for the Religious Education curriculum component, primarily through distance education. In 2013, distance education accounted for approximately 11% of the available courses, offered by only one

² All data compiled here were obtained from the Ministry of Education's national registry of higher education institutions in 2025. For more information, see: <https://emec.mec.gov.br/emec/nova>.

public and one private institution. By 2025, however, distance education had increased to 48.38% of the total offerings, provided by one public and fourteen private institutions.

In 2013, there were 17 institutions offering training in the in-person format. By 2025, this figure had shifted to 16, indicating a slight reduction in availability. This decline occurred exclusively in the private sector, where the number of institutions dropped from 14 to 9, while public institutions expanded their presence from 3 to 7, an increase of approximately 142%.

Although there has been an overall increase in the availability of degree programs in Religious Studies, regional distribution remains uneven, particularly regarding in-person programs. The concentration of these courses is most pronounced in the South and Southeast regions, which account for 13 institutions, while the Northeast has three and the North has two. Most of these programs are located in state capitals or major regional hubs, failing to reach the country's interior. In those areas, education takes place predominantly through distance learning, offered almost exclusively by private institutions.

Given this scenario, education systems, especially public institutions, had to organize their teacher training since the enactment of the LDB (Law 9.394/1996) established that a specialized teaching degree is the minimum qualification required to teach Basic Education from the 6th grade of Elementary School onwards (Brazil, 1996). Starting in 2019, states and municipalities began working collaboratively to develop curricular proposals for the Religious Education subject. For example, the State of Paraíba, in partnership with the National Union of Municipal Education Officers (*UNDIME-União Nacional dos Dirigentes Municipais de Educação*), developed the Paraíba State Curricular Proposal for Early Childhood, Elementary, and High School Education in 2018. This document was created collaboratively, involving municipal education departments, the State Board of Education, the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), the Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG), and the State University of Paraíba (UEPB), as well as other educational bodies and civil society organizations (Paraíba, 2018).

For Religious Education, the Curriculum Guidelines were developed by representatives from the João Pessoa Municipal Department of Education, UFPB, and UEPB. The document states that Religious Education is an essential and decisive curricular component for the holistic development of the human being, since religion is one of the foundations of human life (Paraíba, 2018).

The text also acknowledges the relevance of the general guidelines established by the National Common Curricular Base (*BNCC-Base Nacional Comum Curricular*) for Religious Education, to ensure that the subject meets the following objectives:

- a) Provide religious, cultural, and aesthetic knowledge learning, from religious expressions observed in the students' realities;
- b) Provide knowledge regarding the right to freedom of conscience and belief, with the constant aim of promoting human rights;
- c) Develop competencies and skills that foster dialogue between religious and secular perspectives on life, practicing respect for freedom of belief and the pluralism of ideas, in accordance with the Federal Constitution;

d) Contribute to students constructing their own personal sense of purpose based on values, ethical principles, and citizenship. (Paraíba, 2018)

In accordance with the document, the objectives

[...] weave a web of knowledge, an investment in present and future generations, recognizing the existence of human relationships essential to life's values, within a process of humanizing education through caring and educating (Paraíba, 2018).

This proposal was a reference for municipalities in Paraíba to develop their pedagogical proposals across various fields of knowledge, with a particular focus on Religious Education, given the limited cultural capital available in many schools and municipal education departments. However, this article analyzes the relationship between school culture and Religious Education within the João Pessoa municipal education system, based on a case study of a school located in a neighborhood on the capital's outskirts.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SCHOOL CULTURE IN JOÃO PESSOA: BETWEEN PREJUDICE AND THE NEED TO KNOW – REMINISCENCES OF AN EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

To consolidate the guidelines for the Religious Education subject, the João Pessoa Municipal Government has been offering training initiatives for teachers in this field. Over the past five years, the Municipal Department of Education (SEDEC-JP-*Secretaria Municipal de Educação*) has conducted these training sessions on a regular basis. The training program includes monthly meetings lasting four hours, which are integrated into the teachers' working hours.

The Department has established institutional partnerships with educational development organizations, such as the Alpargatas Institute and the Institute for Co-responsibility in Education (ICE), expanding the range and quality of the training provided.

In 2024, the training programs promoted by the Alpargatas Institute focused on the implementation of Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008, which mandate the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history and culture, respectively. The training guided schools in developing interdisciplinary projects that addressed these themes across all areas of knowledge. These projects received financial support to fund the activities planned at the school sites.

The training provided by the Institute for Social Co-Responsibility (ICE-*Instituto de Corresponsabilidade Social*) was available on the institution's digital platform, allowing teachers to fit the training modules into their schedules.

During the 2024 academic year, all training sessions conducted by SEDEC-JP and its partner institutions focused on implementing the relevant laws and discussing how each field of study could incorporate these laws into its curricula and teaching practices. In particular, the goal within Religious Education was to integrate the historical and cultural

contributions of Black and Indigenous peoples across various aspects of social life, including culture, sports, religion, and science, among others.

Based on this training, educational guidelines, and established institutional partnerships, it was possible to structure a Religious Education curriculum grounded in the cultural diversity of the community and the country. This curriculum aims to broaden understanding of different religious groups and implement the legal mandates of Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008, while aligning with the specific competencies for this subject area established by the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC).

The number of tenured Religious Education teachers in the João Pessoa municipal school system is notably low, with most educators employed under temporary contracts. This situation arises because there has never been a public civil service exam specifically for this subject area. The tenured teachers currently teaching this subject initially entered the system through exams for other subjects and later transitioned to Religious Education, often due to continuing education or an academic interest in the field, frequently gained through postgraduate studies. In some instances, training in the Science of Religion was undertaken after the teachers had already joined the school system.

However, the João Pessoa Municipal Department of Education has a Religious Education Coordination unit responsible for organizing training sessions, guiding the pedagogical development of the subject, and ensuring the implementation of guidelines established for each school year. This unit works with teachers and school administrators, providing didactic guidance on the approach to the subject. It is supported by an educational inspectorate tasked with monitoring and evaluating compliance with legal requirements in municipal schools.

In the 2024 academic year, one of the article's authors began teaching Religious Education within the João Pessoa Municipal Education System. The selection process was based on a curriculum review conducted by the Municipal Department of Education. He was hired as a full-time T-40³ teacher at an elementary and middle school (serving grades 1 through 9) located in an outlying area of the capital of Paraíba, carrying out pedagogical work guided by the 2024 Curriculum Guidelines and the continuing education programs offered by the Department of Education.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF JOÃO PESSOA: THE BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY

In this section, we use the first-person singular to recount experiences in a public school, as this reflects the teaching practice of one of the article's authors⁴. This case study aims to establish a form of school ethnography, as proposed by Mattos (2006), Cipiniuk (2014), and Pereira (2017).

³ The T-40 work schedule consists of 40 hours per week, with 27 hours allocated to classroom instruction and 13 hours to lesson planning and student support.

⁴ This is about Professor Johnatan, who was appointed to serve as a contracted teacher at the school. He holds a degree in History and Sociology, a *lato sensu* postgraduate qualification in the Sociology of Religion and Health.

The concept of school ethnography highlights the intersection of anthropology and education, presenting a new way of producing knowledge. It allows for fresh possibilities for “looking at the school, raising new questions” (Pereira, 2017). According to Mattos (2006), ethnography involves the careful and detailed observation of both typical and atypical events within the community under study. Cipiniuk (2014) conducted research in a school setting and cautioned against the dangers of naturalization that occur when one assumes the role of a teacher in that space:

While the teaching roles held by such researchers may have facilitated access to the school setting, the naturalization inherent in the school environment, along with the challenges regarding perception, classification, and interpretation, can exert a more significant influence when the analytical framing is deeply shaped by the “way” a specific phenomenon is observed or the “way” an ethnographic experience is lived.

Thus, I sought to remain attentive to what might appear as a process of naturalization within that established space, such as viewing a rule regarding a specific prohibition as a moral barrier rooted in the religious outlook of the school administration, cleaning and cafeteria staff, caregivers, and teachers, a dynamic that was reflected in the students' behavior regarding certain topics addressed there.

I must emphasize that the insight prompting the drafting of this article emerged after I had entered and spent time within this specific school setting; specifically, it arose from issues surrounding the suppression of lessons grounded in notions of diversity and cultural relativism. Consequently, much like Biondi (2010) in her ethnography of a total institution⁵, after a period of fieldwork (within the school), I began organizing the data I had gathered, relying on memory to lend the account an ethnographic systematicity based on thick description of lived experiences, as well as on the documentation and logging of repressive incidents that might arise during teaching activities.

I will begin my ethnographic account by describing my journey. It began in December 2023, when I submitted my résumé to the Municipal Department of Education, specifically to the Human Resources division. My initial expectation was to work in a role aligned with my degree in History Education, preferably with middle school classes (Ensino Fundamental II). However, in March 2024, I was contacted by a staff member from the City Hall HR department, who was consistently helpful and respectful, and asked to come to the department offices. At that time, he provided a list of the documents required to fill an open position at two schools within the municipal network (EMAI), allowing me to choose between them based on my availability and location. I opted for a school located approximately 10 km from my home.

He has completed Master's and Doctoral studies in the same field. His academic background and teaching experience in basic education were decisive factors in his placement at the school. In addition to teaching Religious Education to classes in both the early and later stages of elementary/middle school (Ensino Fundamental I and II), he also taught a subject known as “Guided Study” to the later-stage classes, a course designed to instruct students on how to organize and establish routines for their schoolwork. The reason for assigning him these two completely different subjects was the need to round out his teaching workload.

⁵ The concept of the disciplinary institution appears in the writings of Michel Foucault (1987), who cites the school, the factory, the hospital, and the prison as institutions of training and docilization.

However, the staff member informed me that the available position was for the Religious Education subject, covering classes from the 1st to the 9th grade of elementary and middle school, a novel experience for me, even after more than a decade of teaching. I accepted the challenge, signed the contract, and reported to the school administration the following day.

The pedagogical and subject-area coordinators provided the supporting materials: for the lower grades (1st–5th), educational booklets focused on ethical values and citizenship; and for the upper grades (6th–9th), materials covering world religions, their rituals, and festivals, using a more pluralistic and practical approach aimed at understanding the role of religion in everyday life. I also received the pedagogical curriculum frameworks, detailing the specific topics of study, competencies, and skills, along with their corresponding codes, which had to be included in the bi-weekly lesson plans called lesson-by-lesson plans that required coordinator approval before classes began.

The lesson planning process is called lesson-by-lesson planning by the pedagogical coordination teams, guided by the João Pessoa City Department of Education, and can be characterized as a didactic sequence. This lesson-by-lesson process was organized in two ways: 1) the teacher received an Excel spreadsheet from the pedagogical coordination team and planned or proposed the activities for two weeks for each class; the spreadsheet was then submitted to the coordination team, as the lessons required their review and approval. This process had the content to be covered, the competencies and skills to be addressed, the methodologies, the teaching resources, and the references used; and 2) the teacher repeated the same procedure every week within a system called “Educasim”, the municipal school network's official platform. Teachers complained about this redundant record-keeping workload, given that the procedures were essentially identical, differing only in format (Excel vs. digital platform) and submission destination (school coordination vs. the network's official channel), which they found exhausting and unnecessary.

After sending my initial lesson plan and preparing to teach the classes, I was called to a meeting with the pedagogical coordination team. During the meeting, I received a few “warnings” about the classes. They emphasized the need to avoid “controversial topics,” since, according to the coordinators, parents in the school community were “quite religious,” meaning predominantly Christian. I immediately clarified that my teaching practice would not lead to any form of conflict, given that the law prohibits religious proselytism (Article 33 of the LDB) and guarantees respect for the religious identity and fundamental rights of children and adolescents (Article 3 of the ECA), principles upheld by the 1988 Federal Constitution.

In the first classes of the middle school level, I prioritized discussing the importance of religious diversity and freedom of belief in our country. We read and interpreted Article 5 of the Federal Constitution, specifically Clause VI:

Freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable; the free exercise of religious worship is ensured, and the protection of places of worship and their liturgies is guaranteed, as provided by law.” (Brazil, 1988).

From this content, we sought to develop competencies and skills that would foster dialogue among diverse religious and secular worldviews, encouraging respect for the plurality of ideas, following the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC, 2017).

Subsequently, I surveyed the religions practiced by the institution's students. I found that most of the school community identifies with branches of Christianity, with few adherents of other traditions, such as Afro-Indigenous religions. However, when we introduced the study of these traditions, I observed a positive reception and curiosity among the students. Some Christian students even demonstrated familiarity with Afro-Brazilian chants and rituals, revealing that such expressions were not unknown to them.

Then, I proposed activities focused on the pedagogical nature of biblical narratives, exploring the role of religion as a moral and social cohesion. We began with Christian-based religions, seeking to understand their ethical principles and civilizational values. We broadened the analysis to include other religious expressions, highlighting cultural similarities and differences, to appreciate otherness and the development of identities open to social, cultural, and gender diversity.

This practice resulted in a wealth of materials and discussions, through which Religious Education was a pedagogical space that respects plurality rather than reproducing dogmas, aligning with the legal and ethical guidelines that underpin Brazilian public education.

However, as I began to explore the Afro-Indigenous religions, specifically focusing on *Jurema Sagrada* and *Candomblé*, certain challenges began to emerge. My entire approach was grounded in training provided by the municipal government in partnership with the Alparagatas Institute. These teachings equipped me with the theoretical and methodological tools to present the subject through musical engagement, a strategy that fosters experiential learning and raises student awareness. To this end, I brought several musical instruments of African origin into the classroom.

Based on Afro-Indigenous religious traditions, we had listening and group singing activities of traditional songs found in the *terreiros* (ritual centers). The students' response was immediate: the atmosphere became joyful and participatory, characterized by mutual respect. I used a *caxixi*, a rattle, and an *atabaque*, pedagogical tools to support the cultural and symbolic richness of Afro-Brazilian traditions. The students, most of whom were Christian, grasped the educational purpose of the activity and showed genuine interest in the subject.

However, this moment of meaningful classroom learning ended up with an incident of intolerance within the school environment. A staff member, a caregiver at the institution, recorded a video during the activity and shared it in a messaging group for the school's female staff. The video was accompanied by the comment: "The brothel started early here in the seventh-grade class." Other messages followed, including: "I bind this in the name of Jesus" and "Does the administration know about this nonsense?" I was informed

of the incident. The messages were sent to me by one of the caregivers who held a more open and respectful view regarding religious diversity.

Later, I was summoned to an “urgent meeting” by the school administration. Upon arrival, I found the principal, the pedagogical coordinator, and the administrative director present. As soon as I sat down, the principal began by stating: “Teacher, you brought an instrument into the school, and this is causing problems with some parents. They do not like having these things exposed in this manner here.”

I clarified that I had not brought just one instrument, but three, and that all of them had been used exclusively for pedagogical purposes, in accordance with the Curriculum Guidelines and the laws governing Religious Education. I asked for the identities of the individuals who had complaints and requested a meeting with them to clarify any misunderstandings regarding the educational nature of the work. The principal, however, denied the request, stating that “it would be better to hush the matter up to avoid problems.”

The meeting also had other unrelated topics, such as an alleged conflict with a student, in an attempt to downplay the situation's severity or sidestep the actual issue. At the end, the administration was unequivocal: “Teacher, you must no longer bring the *atabaque* to school.”

The situation escalated when the administrator claimed that an Evangelical student had suffered a “fainting spell” during class, attributing the incident to the “energy emanating from the *atabaque*” and to what had supposedly been “invoked” during the activity. I sought to verify the event with the students, but none confirmed that such a thing had occurred; nor was there any record of an incident in the classroom. Had there truly been an episode of physical distress, it would have been noticed by others present.

In conversations with students, I noticed that the school is attended by the children of evangelical pastors, who exert indirect influence on the administration, even though they do not officially dictate educational decisions. I also observed that some classroom aides⁶ discreetly filmed lessons on Afro-Indigenous religions with their cell phones, while others left the room, leaving students with specific educational needs unsupported. These actions show the institutional and personal resistance among some school staff members regarding the approach to religious diversity. This situation vividly illustrates the challenges faced in developing an inclusive, critical, and non-proselytizing approach to Religious Education, which aligns with the Federal Constitution, the LDB (Law of Directives and Bases of National Education), and the BNCC (National Common Curricular Base). Far from being an isolated incident, this reflects a broader school routine still marked by misinformation, prejudice, and remnants of religious exclusivism, factors that undermine the public school's role in promoting plurality and human rights.

6 Municipal schools in João Pessoa have classroom aids. These professionals help students who need specialized educational assistance, in compliance with Resolution 01/2001, which establishes the Curricular Guidelines for Special Education.

With a reprimand from the administration, I challenged the manager by citing current educational legislation, which mandates the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history and culture in schools (Laws No. 10.639/03 and 11.645/08). I further emphasized that the very professional development program offered by the Municipal Department of Education, in partnership with the Alargatas Institute, was designed to prepare teachers to address these topics in the classroom. I also argued that the educational projects planned in this area were sponsored by a private institution and were intended to culminate during “Black November,” in observance of Black Consciousness Week.

Despite this, the director maintained her position, stating that she “didn’t want trouble” and suggesting that I be “more subtle” when addressing such content. In my opinion, the purported dissatisfaction among “students’ parents” served as a rhetorical excuse to hide the true motive behind the censorship: the discomfort of the administrators, influenced by their personal beliefs and religious biases. Such attitudes reflect a misunderstanding between the confessional realm, which belongs to the private sphere, and the public, secular nature of education. Education should be grounded in principles of pluralism, respect, and the appreciation of cultural and religious diversity.

Therefore, the prohibition was imposed by the management team, with the support of certain classroom aides who, acting covertly as agents of control and surveillance, reported on the progress of the lessons. The discomfort of these staff members appeared to be specific to their religious beliefs rather than any actual conflict with the student body. Among the students, any instances of confusion were quickly addressed in the classroom through discussions focused on respect for diversity, as well as racial, gender, and religious equality. This approach aligns with the guarantees outlined in the 1988 Federal Constitution and the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB, 1996).

The school administration's lack of preparedness and reluctance to engage in discussions about cultural and religious diversity reached a breaking point when two pedagogical projects I had planned, in response to a request from the Alargatas Institute, were rejected. The titles and objectives of these projects were as follows:

1. *Raízes* (Roots): a project to revive the *Jurema Sagrada* practice within *Umbanda terreiros* in the city of João Pessoa, Paraíba, aimed at valuing Afro-Brazilian culture and African-derived religious traditions;
2. Ethnomapping of Tabajara culture in the municipality of Conde, Paraíba: a project proposing a reflection on Indigenous otherness, encompassing cultural, historical, and religious aspects.

Both projects aligned with national curriculum guidelines, the laws governing the teaching of ethnic-racial diversity, and the training provided by the Department of Education. This highlights an even more evident institutional paradox: while the municipal

administration officially promotes the inclusion of this content, school leadership, often due to a lack of knowledge or personal convictions, resists implementing it in day-to-day practice.

During a meeting with other faculty members, the projects I had initially proposed sparked enthusiasm among my colleagues. However, the pedagogical coordinator expressed doubts regarding their “feasibility,” questioning whether “this might cause trouble,” whether “other teachers agreed with this sort of thing,” or even if “it was really necessary to talk about such matters so blatantly and scandalously.” This attitude revealed the prevalence of a conservative and prejudiced mindset that tends to avoid addressing topics deemed “sensitive”, especially those involving ethnic-racial and religious issues.

The culmination of this prejudiced and limiting mindset was the replacement of the two original projects with proposals that turned Black and Indigenous cultures into mere folklore, reducing them to depoliticized aesthetic expressions. The new activities prioritized aspects that were “acceptable” or already socially assimilated, such as *moda* or *capoeira*, at the expense of critical discussions regarding racism, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, and Indigenous identity. The then-coordinator of the Humanities department even had to develop new projects from scratch, avoiding any approach that the administration and pedagogical leadership might deem “problematic.”

Despite the resistance, I continued trying to promote initiatives aligned with national guidelines for education on ethnic-racial relations. In an institutional messaging group, I saw the call for the 1st National Olympiad on Ethnic-Racial Relations (OBERERI-1ª *Olimpíada Nacional de Relações Étnico-Raciais*), an initiative supported by the Ministry of Education, in which participation by municipal schools contributed to compliance with Federal Laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08. I managed to register two classes (8th and 9th grades), each consisting of ten students who were motivated to participate in this national academic competition.

As part of our scheduled activities, we were invited to attend a lecture given by a *Ialorixá*, a recognized priestess of Afro-Brazilian religion, at an institution in downtown João Pessoa. The talk focused on discussing ethnic-racial issues and combating racism. The city administration provided transportation, and all students' legal guardians signed consent forms for participation in the event, which took place without incident.

Following the event, I was once again summoned by the administration to provide explanations. They claimed there were “complaints” regarding my conduct as a teacher. These complaints cited supposed conflicts that had already been resolved, a lack of records in the City’s system (which frequently experienced technical glitches), and a failure to adhere to lesson plans. In practice, these accusations were baseless and served as strategies to emotionally destabilize me and retaliate for my insistence on complying with the law and promoting a teaching practice based on ethics, citizenship, and the principle of a secular state.

These incidents of prejudice and discrimination went beyond the school’s walls, reflecting an institutional culture filled with racism and religious intolerance. A notable example occurred during my godson’s birthday party, when one of the school’s classroom assistants was working as support staff for the catering service we hired for the event.

I greeted her cordially upon arrival, and during the celebration, I noticed her filming and taking photos of me, my wife, and my children, as well as the decorations, which featured the theme *A Loja do Mestre André* (Master André's Shop), a character from the *Galinha Pintadinha* series. At that time, I assumed the images were part of her professional duties at the event. However, I learned from another staff member that the videos and photos had been shared in a messaging group for the school's classroom assistants, followed by derogatory comments such as: "look, even the kids' party here is *macumbeiro* style" and "that's how *macumbeiros* are, they have to shove *macumba* into the kids' birthdays too, but if you say anything, they play the victim," followed by laughter and expressions of mockery from other participants (about seven or eight staff members).

It is important to highlight that the party's theme carried no religious connotation at all. The birthday boy's father is a musician, and the theme was chosen to reflect the children's interest in music and instruments. The family also includes both Catholic and Spiritist members, a fact that underscores the baseless nature of the insinuations and highlights the presence of deeply rooted stigmas against religions of African origin.

Having screenshots and records of the conversations, I informed the birthday boy's mother of the incident, and she contacted the owner of the event venue. Upon recognizing the seriousness of the situation, the company decided to suspend the employee, acknowledging her behavior as an act of religious intolerance and racism. When confronted about her actions, the employee tried to downplay the incident, claiming she "hadn't done anything serious," that it was just "lighthearted joking," and that it "wasn't fair to penalize a mother over this."

Based on the evidence I gathered, I asked a colleague who was in contact with the group to ensure that the matter be resolved and that my name no longer be mentioned in the informal conversations among the school staff. I emphasized that I had committed no wrongdoing and that my actions were solely focused on demanding respect and accountability regarding a discriminatory act. This incident occurred within a social context where the lines between the public and private spheres become blurred, reinforcing the same logic of intolerance and silencing that characterizes the school culture under investigation. With this, I conclude the ethnographic account and will now return to writing in the third person.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, we draw on concepts from ethnic-racial studies, specifically focusing on prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism. Our goal is to understand the acts of delegitimization, invalidation, and stigmatization aimed at Afro-Indigenous themes. These themes were not only suppressed within the school we examined but also extended beyond its walls, which is a significant aspect of our study.

Based on Oracy Nogueira (2006, p. 292), we understand that the professionals involved in neutralizing ethnic-racial studies engaged in what the author calls racial prejudice, defined as “a culturally conditioned, unfavorable attitude toward the members of a population.” Thus, opposition to the development of Religious Education was masked by rhetoric regarding moderation and institutional appropriateness, justified by a purported concern to avoid controversy or offense to the Christian community predominant in the area surrounding the school.

In discussing racial prejudice in Brazil, Nogueira highlights the challenges of recognizing and naming racism due to its subtlety, the way it is often disguised, and the use of humor to mask it. This pattern is evident in the case reported here: the administration convened meetings to address the faculty member's alleged “inappropriate behavior”. Derogatory terms were used, such as comparing pedagogical activities aimed at valuing Afro-Indigenous religions to a “brothel”, to ridicule them. Also, videos and images were recorded and circulated in messaging groups, accompanied by mocking, prejudiced commentary. Such conduct reveals the persistence of a veiled racism, which is often disguised as humor, institutional diligence, or moral concern.

As outlined by Sílvia Almeida (2018), racial prejudice is a judgment based on stereotypes regarding individuals belonging to racialized groups, which may or may not result in discriminatory actions. Racial discrimination consists of the practical manifestation of prejudice, expressed through differential treatment and the exclusion of individuals and forms of knowledge. At a more structural level, racism is a system of power that organizes inequalities and produces social advantages or disadvantages depending on the racial group to which an individual belongs, operating both consciously and unconsciously.

Thus, it can be stated that the school's administration, pedagogical coordination team, and some of the aids/caregivers reproduced prejudiced, discriminatory, and racist practices. They were prejudiced in deeming the subject of Afro-Indigenous religions “inappropriate” or “shocking,” reinforcing historical stereotypes that associate the Black sacred with the negative and the profane; discriminatory in preventing these topics from being addressed and promoting differential treatment compared to other religious expressions; and racist in perpetuating, consciously or unconsciously, a system of exclusion that denies legitimacy to Afro-Indigenous knowledge and culture within the school environment, reflecting a structural pattern of racial hierarchy present in Brazilian society.

May this article contribute to critical reflection, educational policies, and institutional oversight mechanisms aimed at addressing school management practices marred by prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Only through pedagogical practices committed to secularism, religious pluralism, and respect for cultural diversity will it be possible to envision a truly inclusive and emancipatory education, one capable of supporting a society less unequal and more respectful of all the religions that make up the Brazilian sociocultural space.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 – Project coordinator; active participation in data analysis and manuscript revision.

Author 2 – Review of data analysis and final review of the manuscript.

Author 3 – Data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing.

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