

## **EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN BRAZIL – WHERE ARE THE DEAF WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO BE AT SCHOOL?**

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### **Abstract**

In Brazil, 4.6 million people suffer from hearing disability; 1.1 million are deaf, totaling 5.7 million Brazilians. The last Brazilian School Census found 74,547 deaf students in Elementary School; in universities there are only 1,582 deaf persons (less than 0.15%). This paper sheds some light over the factors that have led to poor attendance of deaf students in every level of education, using netnography and discussions in closed virtual environments with teaching interpreters of LIBRAS (Brazilian Sign Language), deaf and hearing teachers of Elementary Education, as well as deaf and hearing activists and senior researchers in the field of Deaf Education. The present study provides evidence for the need for urgent revision of the policy on deaf inclusion and on training deaf teachers and teachers for the deaf by the Ministry of Education.

### **THE PROBLEM AND A BRIEF ANALYSIS**

In 2002, the Brazilian government (Brasil, 2002) recognized Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) as “the means of communication and expression, in which the linguistic system of visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for transmitting ideas and facts, stemming from the Brazilian deaf community” (article 1). This recognition was the result of vigorous activism by the deaf communities and led to the reform of the linguistic policy adopted by the government towards schools, namely, the insistence upon an exclusively Portuguese language-based school curriculum and the acquisition of oral Portuguese language by deaf students. This integrationist policy did not lead to satisfactory results, seeing as deaf students either dropped out or were approved automatically and thus obtained their school diplomas as functional illiterates (Souza, 1986; Souza, 2007).

In 2006, Souza claimed that the integrationist policy in Portuguese would only be overturned if the historical logic for imposing Portuguese as the language of instruction was overruled. The author related this logic to the process of Portuguese colonization of the native peoples in Brazil, particularly after 1758, when Portuguese was imposed upon the other languages spoken in colonial Brazil.

Regrettably, this civilizational logic was maintained after the recognition of LIBRAS. As a result, the poor results obtained in school by deaf students remained, a fact that boosted the activism of FENEIS, the National Federation

of Deaf Education and Integration. The negative effects on the education of the deaf caused by this integrationist policy were described in great detail in a letter sent by the FENEIS to the Brazilian Ministry of Education (Feneis, 2011). Therefore, despite current laws that guarantee the right to bilingual education to deaf students, the reality in schools remains the same: Portuguese language is incentivized and used as the language of oral instruction, where deaf students are integrated with hearing students with or without the support of LIBRAS translators and interpreters. The negative results of this practice were acknowledged in the “Report about Linguistic Policy for Bilingual Education – Brazilian Sign Language and Portuguese Language,” which was requested by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to FENEIS and a team of researchers chosen by the ministry. The report was given to the Secretary for Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion (Secadi) in late February, 2014. In the Report “Introduction” the national situation is presented.

In Brazil, 4.6 Million people are hearing impaired and 1.1 Million are deaf, totaling approximately 5.7 Million people. [...] According to the School Census [...] the total number of deaf students in Elementary Education is 74,547, the data indicate insufficient offer and, consequently, low enrollment in child education (4,485); the difficulty in accessing vocational education (370), the predominance of enrollment in elementary school (51,330; the decline in enrollment in high school (8,571); the growing number of enrollments in EJA [adult education schools] (9,611). According to the Higher Education Census [...], there is a total of 5,660 students enrolled in higher education courses, of which 1,582 are deaf, 4,078 are hearing impaired and 148 are deaf-blind. [...] The education of the deaf requires immediate reform [...] seeing as the current policy reinforces premises which in the past supported other failed schooling modalities [...] (MEC/Secadi, 2014, 3)

In the field of forming professionals for teaching the deaf, there have been laudable government initiatives in university-level training of bilingual educators and LIBRAS-Portuguese translators and interpreters since 2006 under the Projeto Nacional Letras-LIBRAS (Language and Literacy-LIBRAS National Project), coordinated by the Federal University of Santa Catarina. These initiatives are expanding to include forming bilingual pedagogues starting in 2013 (Brasil, 2011). Nonetheless, these are still recent and insufficient actions to meet the demand of bilingual professionals in all regions of Brazil. These programs for training bilingual graduates may eventually tear apart the effects of our civilizational history still present in the education of deaf people.

The remarks above show the viewpoint of researchers in the field of deaf education. But from the viewpoint of the parents of deaf children, why is the integrationist Portuguese-language school not good for the deaf child? By listening to them, we could consider looking at this problem from the viewpoint of those truly affected by this policy.

## **OBJECTIVE AND METHOD**

Based on the proposal explained above, the present study aims to understand why some parents have chosen to take their children out of school. We have then chosen to do a case study with a qualitative approach.

As a method we will use netnography, described in this paper as a field of ethnography applied to a virtual environment. (For a good presentation of ethnography, see Noveli, 2010).

Researchers are increasingly participating in virtual social networks such as Facebook® or creating groups in Whatsapp®. This is the case of the authors of this study. We all have personal Facebook® pages where we post, among other things, opinions on the integrationist policy adopted by the government, share news on the passing of new laws affecting deaf education, and rally deaf and hearing people to participate in decision-making bodies, or in debate forums in the various public spheres. They do not use fictitious names and their Facebook® friends are mostly deaf researchers, parents of deaf children, hearing and deaf students interested in deaf education. The discussions occur publicly. In addition to the public comments made by the mother - the selected subject for this study -, there was a conversation between her and Regina Maria de Souza via Messenger®, in a private environment.

## **THE CASE**

Elaine is 42 years old, a hearing, married woman who did not finish elementary school. She has been married for 21 years to the father of Nicolas, a 12-year-old boy who is profoundly deaf from birth due to, by her account, Mondini dysplasia. Elaine has several deaf relatives. In her family there are 16 men who became deaf after six months of age (they were born hearing). Elaine became fluent in LIBRAS out of the necessity to communicate and teach Nicolas. He was placed in a school for hearing children from age 4 and went to an institution for people with disabilities from 11 months to 7 years of age. They live in a city in the state of Minas Gerais where the school policy prioritizes teaching written Portuguese and emphasizes the necessity for oral communication. According to Elaine, in that city there are no schools or classes where deaf students can be taught in LIBRAS. In Nicolas' case, the right to bilingual education with LIBRAS as the language of instruction was violated in school. Because he was deaf, he was directed to an institution for people with disabilities. At age 1, the institution suggested that Elaine requested early retirement for Nicolas. The parents refused.

Elaine enrolled Nicolas in a regular school where he studied until the seventh grade of elementary school. According to Elaine, Nicolas was automatically approved and the school did not offer him suitable learning conditions; the fact that nobody understood LIBRAS at school led to predictable relationship problems between Nicolas, his classmates and hearing teachers. Nicolas is deaf.

At age 10, Nicolas received another diagnosis: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Following this, Elaine chose to take him out of school despite the fact

that, according to the Brazilian legislation, she could be arrested on neglect charges.<sup>1</sup>

## DISCUSSION

There are many similar cases in Brazil, but Elaine's case is exemplary. In addition to the lack of an education setting that was adequate for Nicolas' linguistic and family particularities – he belongs to a family of deaf people –, we note: the insistence upon oral communication; the careful observation by health and education professionals of Nicolas' behavior since infancy; the addition of other “pathologies” to Mondini dysplasia. Special attention must be drawn to the proposed solution: early retirement. And finally, the fact that she has so far received no penalty for refusing to enroll her child in the schools offered by the government.

This case shall be addressed in two different paths: 1 – by considering the constant examination to which Nicolas is submitted; 2 – the proposal of early retirement as part of the solution.

The proper understanding of the process of examination to which Nicolas is submitted is aided by one of Foucault's earliest works. According to him, one of the means used by the school and clinic to discipline the subject is the examination. To Foucault (1991), the examination is a way of

normalizing control, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, classify and punish.[...]

[...] the hospital itself, which is in the first place supposed to be a source of assistance, becomes a place of training and scientific development: an about-face on the power relations and constitution of knowledge. [...]

Similarly, the school becomes a sort of machinery for uninterrupted examination, which follows the teaching operation along the entire process. [...]

3) The examination, surrounded by all its documentation techniques, turns each individual into a “case.” The case [...] is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual that has to be trained, corrected, classified, normalized, excluded. (Foucault, 1991, 164-170).

Between the clinic and the school a capillary and solidary relationship is therefore built, where Nicolas and his way of existence have been clearly defined: an individual who, by organic constitution, needs treatment more than schooling. This is why there is no legal consequences for the mother who, in infringement of the law, refuses to keep him in school.

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<sup>1</sup>Accounts, discussions and statements by the mother, Elaine Aparecida Baia, are publicly available on her Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/elaine.baia?pnref=story>>. Or on my timeline: <<https://www.facebook.com/reginamaria.souza.94>> between February 6 and 10, 2015.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the clinic/school system suggested that the mother requested early retirement for Nicolas, who would then receive a permanent stipend equivalent to the minimum wage in the country. In other words, Nicolas would be financed by the State to be kept alive, but out of school. The solution found by the system would turn his parents into health agents who would take care of his "illness." Foucault explains that this kind of operation by the powers of the State requires that parents be

diagnosticians, therapists and agents of health. In other words, at the very moment that the cellular family is enclosed in a dense affective space, it is endowed with a rationality that, in the name of illness, plugs it into a technology, into an external medical power and knowledge. The new substantial, affective and sexual family is at the same time a medicalized family (Foucault, 2001, 317).

Social assistance programs and subsidization, though existent in socialist countries, are much stronger and prevalent in capitalist societies. If the examination is a disciplinary mechanism whose action binds subject and institution, then systems of health insurance, retirement, and social security in general are regulating mechanisms of the modern State "which aim at the population and not the territory, which rely on economic knowledge, which control society by means of security devices" (Castro, 2009, 193).

The security devices also serve to decrease the chance of rebellion, which may occur as a result of poor living conditions. The social security subsidy systems, as in the case of Nicolas, allow individuals to subsist despite their "abnormality," "old age," "unemployment" without disrupting the network of economic power which helps to exclude them; that is, the individual is taken from the spaces where the "normal," "non-handicapped," "productive," "adult" individuals go about and produce knowledge. To Foucault (2000) these mechanisms for exclusion are the effects of biopower, a technology of population control that is the basis for a form of government termed "biopolitics." "Biopolitics deals with population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and a power's problem [...]" (Foucault, 2000, 292-293).

Biopolitics does not tend to the deaf person and their language, or to the sick person and their feelings, but to "intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, at the level of their generality" (id.). Among these interventions are epidemiological studies and public policies adopted to a) fight the emergence of the individual outside of statistical standards considered "normal" or the uprising of a new "abnormality;" b) treat or correct "abnormality" without considering the uniqueness or decisions of the individual, given that biopolitics applies to the amorphous masses and not the individual in his or her humanity; c) control the unproductive masses in a world which demands performance and happy, healthy, consuming subjects; a control which is maintained by creating permanent social security systems which leave the individual dependent and therefore excluded. Biopolitics does not disrupt public policies or school practices, but rather reinforces and maintains them.

In moments of tension, reforms are produced to alleviate this tension between the capillary points of power. But reforms are nothing more than a redistribution of power, a superficial reorganization of practices, an appropriation of the achievements of social movements which submits them to a logic of interpretation that keeps these same practices under “growing repression” (Foucault, 1998, 72). “This is why the notion of ‘reform’ is so stupid and hypocritical” (id.) Either reform is carried out by those whom it will concern, thus a revolutionary action because it “questions the totality of power and its hierarchy” (ibid.), or it is a reform realized by those who take upon themselves the function of speaking for the others and deciding what is convenient for themselves, creating a redistribution of power, a political assimilation of a speech that is not their own in order to maintain the same practices and the same knowledge and power mechanisms.

In conclusion of this paper, the data suggest that deaf education in Brazil is going through a period more akin to reform than disruption of the logic of civilizing integration into the Portuguese-speaking society. However, it must be noted that the deaf and LIBRAS have not been assimilated to monolingualism in Portuguese because the deaf community is able to resist – such as abandoning the Portuguese-language school – and reinvent, in spite of hearing educators, new ways of existence which blur the lines between “offline” and “online.” Perhaps at this frontier lies the deaf victory cry.

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