

Anti-racist education in the final years of elementary school: Machado de Assis's short stories in an interdisciplinary approach

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of an interdisciplinary approach to anti-racist education, based on the short stories “Pai contra Mãe” and “O Caso da Vara”, by Machado de Assis. The qualitative research involved 27 students from the last cycle of elementary school, integrating Languages and Human Sciences in accordance with BNCC guidelines and the Curricular Guidelines for Education on Ethnic-Racial Relations. The approach adopted proposes that anti-racist education goes beyond the mere transmission of information and should raise awareness and establish a direct link to practical application in order to promote effective change. The results, analyzed using Bardin's methodology (2011), showed a deeper understanding of the historical aspects related to slavery, recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity and an emotional awareness of racism. However, obstacles linked to the language used by Machado de Assis were identified, suggesting the need for pedagogical adaptations. The conclusion is that literature, when associated with an interdisciplinary approach, is a valuable resource for stimulating critical reflection on structural racism within civic education.

Keywords: Anti-racist Education. Machado de Assis. Interdisciplinarity. Elementary Education. Didactic sequence.

Educação antirracista nos anos finais do Ensino Fundamental: contos machadianos em abordagem interdisciplinar

Resumo

Este texto examina a implementação de uma abordagem interdisciplinar para a educação antirracista, fundamentada nos contos “Pai contra Mãe” e “O Caso da Vara”, de Machado de Assis. A pesquisa qualitativa contou com a participação de 27 estudantes do último ciclo do Ensino Fundamental, integrando Linguagens e Ciências Humanas, conforme as diretrizes da BNCC e as orientações das Diretrizes Curriculares para a Educação das Relações Étnico-Raciais. A abordagem utilizada propõe que a educação antirracista vai além da mera transmissão de informações, devendo promover sensibilização e estabelecer relação direta com a aplicação prática, a fim de promover mudanças efetivas. Os resultados, analisados com base na metodologia de Bardin (2011), demonstraram compreensão mais profunda dos aspectos históricos relacionados à escravidão,

reconhecimento da importância da interdisciplinaridade e sensibilização emocional diante do racismo. No entanto, foram identificados obstáculos ligados à linguagem utilizada por Machado de Assis, sugerindo a necessidade de adaptações pedagógicas. Conclui-se que a literatura, quando associada a uma abordagem interdisciplinar, é um recurso valioso para estimular reflexões críticas sobre o racismo estrutural na formação cidadã.

Palavras-chave: Educação antirracista; Machado de Assis; Interdisciplinaridade; Ensino Fundamental; Sequência didática.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the curriculum structure of education in Brazil has undergone significant changes, especially after the enactment of Law No. 10.639/2003, which made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory in all schools, with a focus on the areas of Arts Education, Literature, and Brazilian History. This legislation represented progress in valuing the identity, culture, and history of Afro-descendant peoples in the country, acknowledging the importance of including Black contributions in the shaping of Brazilian society.

In this context, the *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação das Relações Étnico-Raciais e para o Ensino de História e Cultura Afro-Brasileira e Africana* (Brazil, 2013) established guidelines for incorporating this theme into the school environment. They emerged as a response to the demands of the Black Movement and to the need to reformulate the school curriculum, which had traditionally been marked by a Eurocentric focus. These guidelines aim to guide the implementation of Law No. 10.639/2003 (Brazil, 2003), establishing principles that promote education valuing ethnic-racial diversity and fostering respect for differences.

Among the proposed principles, the strengthening of identities and rights stands out, as well as the appreciation of characteristics that distinguish Black people from other groups within the Brazilian population and educational actions aimed at combating racism and discrimination. These principles seek to form critical citizens capable of recognizing and valuing differences while acting against racism in its various forms.

To ensure the effective application of these principles, the guidelines emphasize the importance of teacher training, the creation of appropriate teaching materials, and the development of activities that encourage dialogue and mutual respect within the school environment. They also highlight the need for interdisciplinary work, involving different areas of knowledge in addressing ethnic-racial issues.

In this context, literature emerges as a valuable tool for promoting anti-racist education, as it allows complex topics to be approached in a sensitive and reflective manner. As Pacheco (2017) points out, literature provides aesthetic experiences that broaden students' worldview, helping to form critical readers who are aware of social issues. The short stories of Machado de Assis, with their sharp social critique, offer fertile ground for such reflections, as the author stands out for his keen insight into the social dynamics and power structures of nineteenth-century Brazil, a period marked by slavery and structural racism.

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis was born on June 21, 1839, on Morro do Livramento, in Rio de Janeiro, the son of a Black father and an Azorean mother. His humble origins and Afro-descendant background in a slaveholding society are essential aspects for understanding his work and worldview.

Machado de Assis's life was full of obstacles. He lost his mother at the age of ten and, a few years later, his father, Francisco de Assis. He was raised by his stepmother, Maria Inês. Self-taught, he overcame social and racial barriers to become one of the greatest names in Brazilian literature. Working as a typesetter at the *Imprensa Nacional*, he began his literary journey by publishing his first texts in newspapers and magazines of the time (Lajolo, 1980; Pinto, 2018).

He became close to intellectuals and journalists, embracing the first opportunities that came his way. In 1856, he met Manuel Antônio de Almeida, who supported his literary career. His work includes novels, short stories, poetry, plays, chronicles, and literary criticism, all reflecting a critical view of nineteenth-century Brazilian society. Machado was considered one of the greatest writers and intellectuals of his time, remembered as the

founder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and as a master of all literary genres in Brazil (Lajolo, 1980; Pinto, 2018).

The short stories *Pai contra Mãe* (*Father versus Mother*) and *O Caso da Vara* (*The Rod Case*) offer important educational opportunities to discuss ethnic-racial relations in the school context. In *Pai contra Mãe*, Machado de Assis tells the story of Cândido Neves, a poor white man who, in order to support his family, makes a living capturing runaway enslaved people. When he captures Arminda, a pregnant woman pleading for freedom, Cândido ignores her pleas, focusing solely on the bounty. This act of violence leads to a miscarriage, exposing the cruelty of the slave system.

In *O Caso da Vara*, Machado recounts the story of Damião, a seminarian who runs away and seeks refuge in the home of Sinhá Rita. There, he witnesses the punishment of the enslaved girl Lucrecia and, although he initially feels compassion for her suffering, he ultimately hands over the rod to Sinhá Rita so she can whip the girl, a gesture of self-preservation that reveals the moral complexities of social relations during Brazil's slavery period.

The *Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)* recommends that, to enhance students' literary comprehension in the final years of elementary school, teaching should encourage skills such as analyzing narrative fiction texts, identifying plot and narrative perspective, and understanding the effects of meaning produced by figurative language (Brazil, 2018). The short stories of Machado de Assis, with their stylistic and thematic variety, represent an excellent resource for developing these competencies.

Additionally, the BNCC highlights the importance of engaging students in reading literary texts that present a level of challenge in relation to their current abilities and previous experiences (Brazil, 2018). In this context, Machado's short stories, though demanding greater effort due to their language and style, provide a valuable literary experience and help form critical and reflective readers.

Given this potential, this study sought to investigate how an interdisciplinary approach based on these short stories by Machado de Assis can contribute to promoting anti-racist education in the final years of elementary school. The main objective was to

explore the pedagogical possibilities of integrating the fields of Portuguese Language and Human Sciences through these literary texts, encouraging critical reflection on slavery and its repercussions in contemporary Brazilian society.

The interdisciplinary approach is a teaching methodology that seeks to eliminate the segmentation of knowledge by promoting meaningful connections between different areas of learning. Within the scope of anti-racist education, interdisciplinarity proves to be an effective tool for understanding the complexities of ethnic-racial issues, enabling broader and more contextualized analyses.

When it comes to Languages and Human Sciences, this approach fosters a rich dialogue among disciplines such as Portuguese Language, English Language, Arts, Physical Education, History, and Geography. This interaction contributes to understanding slavery and racism as historical and social phenomena that continue to influence society today.

In the Portuguese Language component of the final years of elementary school, language practices take place through contact with different text genres found in distinct fields of activity and across various subjects. At this stage of education, such practices are “artistic-literary, research and study, journalistic-media, civic and public life, personal, citizen, and investigative” (Brazil, 2018, p. 136).

From the perspective of incorporating the theme of racism through the short stories *Pai contra Mãe* and *O Caso da Vara*, the goal is to promote a reflection on these texts that goes beyond mere comprehension and interpretation of the writing, integrating the sociological aspects of the period in which these works were produced.

Thus, an interdisciplinary didactic sequence was created involving the curricular components of Portuguese Language, English Language, History, Geography, Arts, and Physical Education, aligned with the competencies and skills established in the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)*. This proposal was implemented in two final-year elementary school classes, and its results were analyzed through semi-structured interviews with the students.

2 Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach, applied in nature and descriptive in character. The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the need to understand in detail the students' beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations regarding their experience with the interdisciplinary didactic sequence based on Machado de Assis's short stories.

As Gaskell (2002, p. 65) states, the purpose of qualitative research is the "detailed understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivation in relation to people's behaviors in specific social contexts." From this perspective, this research approach focuses on aspects of reality that cannot be measured numerically, addressing the field of meanings, motivations, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes (Minayo, 2014).

The research is characterized as applied, since it seeks to solve concrete problems in the educational field, specifically those related to the education of ethnic-racial relations. As Gil (2010, p. 16) points out, applied research "includes studies developed with the aim of solving problems within the societies in which researchers live."

In terms of purpose, the study is classified as descriptive, as it aims to describe the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation without interfering in the environment where it occurs. According to Köche (2011, p. 124), "in descriptive research there is no prior manipulation of variables. Their manifestation is verified a posteriori." Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to analyze and interpret the results and achieve a more detailed understanding of the subject under study.

The study was conducted with 27 students from two classes of the 8th and 9th grades in the final years of elementary school, aged between 14 and 16, in a city located in the Central-West region of Minas Gerais.

In accordance with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council (*Conselho Nacional de Saúde – CNS*), the research was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee (*Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa – CEP*), under approval number 6.901.830, with the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration (*Certificado de Apresentação de Apreciação Ética – CAAE*): 79444224.1.0000.0295.

To conduct the research, a meeting was scheduled with the school's administrative team to explain the proposal and request permission for its implementation. An agreement was then formalized through the principal's signature and authorization.

Subsequently, students from the 8th and 9th grades were informed about the research proposal and the need for written consent, as they were minors. Authorization was granted by each student's legal guardian, who consented to their participation with full awareness of the nature of the procedures and the potential risks involved, ensuring voluntary participation without any form of coercion.

The didactic sequence was carried out over five class sessions, integrating the curricular components of Portuguese Language, English Language, History, Geography, Arts, and Physical Education. The activities were designed to connect different areas of knowledge around the short stories *Pai contra Mãe* (*Father versus Mother*) and *O Caso da Vara* (*The Rod Case*), both by Machado de Assis, encouraging reflection on slavery and its repercussions in Brazilian society.

In the first class, focused on Portuguese Language, students were introduced to Machado de Assis and his literary work. The evolution of his literary phases was presented, which opened space for reflection on changing perspectives regarding the society of his time. Students were then organized in pairs for a shared reading of the short stories *Pai contra Mãe* and *O Caso da Vara*. After the reading, a discussion circle was held to analyze the plots and outcomes of the narratives, addressing historical aspects of the portrayed

period, the relationship between master and enslaved person, social dependency relations, and human nature.

In the second class, focused on Arts, an image analysis activity was conducted to contextualize the period of slavery in Brazilian history. Paintings from the *Museu da Inconfidência* in Ouro Preto were used, along with period photographs and art books featuring works by Jean-Baptiste Debret and Johann Moritz Rugendas, artists who depicted slavery in their art. The analysis aimed to highlight the cruelty of this period and forms of cultural resistance, establishing connections with Machado de Assis's short stories. After the discussion, students created posters with anti-racist messages using different artistic techniques.

In the third class, focused on English Language, historical aspects related to the arrival of Africans in the Americas as enslaved people were discussed. The linguistic variation known as *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), also called *Black English* or *Black British* in England, was explored. Students analyzed examples of linguistic variation and debated the importance of recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity.

In the fourth class, focused on Geography, emphasis was placed on studying the African influence on Brazil's cultural and social formation. A historical map was presented showing the regions where Africans arrived, concentrating mainly in Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and Pernambuco. Students analyzed the historical context of slavery and its cultural contributions, observing continuities and transformations in spatial relations.

In the fifth class, focused on History, students revisited the short stories studied in Portuguese Language to answer the proposed questions. They were also given a printed, color activity sheet containing images of instruments used for torture during the slavery period (photographs from the *Museu da Inconfidência*). The discussion focused on the causes of violence against marginalized populations, identifying different forms of contact, adaptation, or exclusion among social groups throughout time and space.

After the didactic sequence was completed, students were invited to participate in an interview consisting of ten questions that allowed detailed and reflective responses

about the topic covered in the classes. The students took the printed interviews home, had two days to complete them, and all 27 participants returned their responses.

Data collection through semi-structured interviews aimed to understand the students' perceptions of their experience with the didactic sequence, identifying learning outcomes, challenges, and reflections generated by the activities.

The analysis of the data obtained through the interviews was conducted using the content analysis technique proposed by Bardin (2011). According to the author, this analysis consists of several stages, including “pre-analysis (organization), material exploration (coding and categorization), and result interpretation (inference and analysis)” (Bardin, 2011, p. 125).

In the pre-analysis stage, the first step was to select the material to be examined and conduct an “exploratory or floating reading” (Bardin, 2011). The text was then edited to form the research dataset, including only the students' responses relevant to the study's objective and discarding those that were disconnected or inconsistent with the questions.

The exploration stage involved coding and categorizing the responses to identify recurring themes and relevant patterns. The emerging categories were historical and cultural understanding, emotional awareness, recognition of interdisciplinarity, and linguistic obstacles.

Finally, in interpreting the results, links were established between the identified categories and the adopted theoretical framework. Thus, the analysis examined how the interdisciplinary didactic sequence promoted anti-racist education and contributed to the students' critical development.

3 Results and Discussion

The analysis of the interviews conducted with students after the implementation of the interdisciplinary didactic sequence based on Machado de Assis's short stories *Pai contra Mãe* (*Father versus Mother*) and *O Caso da Vara* (*The Rod Case*) revealed significant aspects of the learning experience and its impact on the understanding of ethnic-

racial relations. The results were organized into categories, following the content analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011), allowing for a comprehensive view of the students' perceptions.

3.1 Historical and cultural understanding

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One of the most relevant categories in the students' responses concerns their historical and cultural understanding of slavery and its repercussions in Brazilian society. Several answers highlighted that the interdisciplinary approach fostered a deeper grasp of slavery, Black culture, and the history of Brazil.

Comments such as "I learned about how enslaved people were treated, with torture, discrimination, and prejudice"; "People still treat Black people as inferior"; "It helps us understand that today's racism comes from relationships formed back then"; "I understood that Black people had no rights at all"; "Yes, because it explains that slavery was not just work but suffering" show that the methodology was effective in conveying historical and cultural knowledge and in connecting past and present. Reading Machado de Assis, combined with resources from other subjects such as Arts and History, appears to have contributed to a more detailed and enriching understanding of the topics discussed.

Students perceived, across several areas of knowledge, that elements present in the short stories studied relate to the period of slavery, especially in the Arts and History classes. They identified the social conditions and the normalization of violence against enslaved people, revealing how these aspects were embedded in the social routine of that time.

These observations confirm Carvalho's view (2016), which emphasizes the effectiveness of Machado de Assis's short stories for teaching History by enabling an understanding of nineteenth-century Brazilian society through social practices grounded in paternalism. According to the author, "Machado understood the society of his time through social practices based on a mentality that historiography has called paternalism" (Carvalho,

2016, p. 60). In this context, literature functions as a historical document that reveals the complexities of social relations in slaveholding Brazil.

3.2 Emotional awareness and critical stance

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The second category identified relates to the students' emotional awareness and critical stance toward the themes discussed. Responses such as "What Machado wrote was very sad, I think he really experienced this"; "It shows how slavery was something cruel and unjust"; "The circle of the rejected shocked me"; "You can see how relationships were based on power and fear"; "There is no more slavery, but Black people still suffer racism"; "You can see how social inequality began in the time of slavery" indicate that the short stories produced emotional impact and awareness, encouraging deeper reflection on slavery and its implications.

The revelation of Machado de Assis's Afro-descendant background also sparked surprise and reflection among students, underscoring the importance of recognizing the author's "place of speech" to understand his work. This discovery seems to have heightened students' sensitivity to tensions related to ethnic-racial issues, supporting the hypothesis that identifying Machado's racial identity can foster a more critical reading of his texts.

The emotion provoked by the short stories and by the historical context contributed to the development of a critical stance regarding racism and its manifestations in contemporary society. Some responses indicated that students began to perceive racism as a phenomenon with historical and structural roots, acknowledging its continued presence today.

These findings reinforce Santos's view (2014), which points to the potential of art in shaping ethnic-racial consciousness by offering aesthetic experiences capable of sensitizing students to social issues. For the author, "The methodological practice of Art education allows learners to access the recognition and construction of their own educational process and can facilitate reflection on the representation of Black people in

the educational context and in social spaces” (Santos, 2014, p. 6). Literature, as an artistic form, proved effective in stimulating critical reflections on racism and its social repercussions.

3.3 Recognition of interdisciplinarity

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The third category identified in the students’ responses concerns their recognition of the interdisciplinary approach and its potential for understanding ethnic-racial relations. Several responses indicate that the participants understood the concept of interdisciplinarity and the connection between different areas of knowledge.

Comments such as “I noticed that the subjects complement each other,” “I found it interesting to combine several disciplines,” “I saw how the subjects are related,” “By connecting history through literature, the student becomes more aware of themselves and aspects of reality,” and “I really enjoyed learning about capoeira in Physical Education” show that the students recognized how different subjects can be interconnected to provide a broader and deeper view of a topic. The integration among disciplines allowed them to analyze the subject from multiple perspectives, including literature, history, art, and even sports.

Statements such as “I learned that everything is connected – Portuguese, Arts, History,” “I understood slavery better in the History and Geography classes, and I also learned that Machado de Assis lived during that time,” and “Even though we already knew slavery existed, when we saw the paintings in the Art class, it felt more real,” reveal that the interdisciplinary approach was effective and significantly contributed to the students’ learning.

These results support the hypothesis that it is possible to conduct interdisciplinary work involving Languages and Human Sciences based on Machado de Assis’s short stories. The proposal fostered a broader and more contextualized understanding of ethnic-racial relations, contributing to the formation of critical and socially aware students.

As Bittencourt (2009) points out, novels, poems, and short stories are texts that, by their very nature, favor interdisciplinary activities. “The use of literary texts by other disciplines is part of a long school tradition [...] Currently, literature is part of the contents of Portuguese Language, but it has also been used by other disciplines” (Bittencourt, 2009, p. 338–339). The use of these literary texts across different disciplines enriches the integration of knowledge areas, enhancing the learning experience.

3.4 Linguistic challenges and necessary mediations

The fourth category identified refers to the linguistic obstacles students encountered when reading Machado de Assis’s short stories, as well as the strategies required to overcome these difficulties. When asked whether reading the stories sparked interest in exploring other works by the author, many students responded: “I liked it, but it’s hard to understand everything,” “I liked the way he writes, but it’s kind of difficult,” “It’s good, but I don’t know if I would read more of his work,” and “I don’t know, I found it interesting, but it’s a bit tiring.”

These responses reveal comprehension difficulties resulting from the sophisticated language and literary style of Machado de Assis, which require specific pedagogical interventions, such as the use of images, guided discussions, and other forms of didactic support to make learning more accessible and engaging.

Identifying these challenges reinforces the need to adopt pedagogical strategies that enable students to access classical literature, including adaptations and mediations that make the texts more comprehensible for contemporary youth without compromising their literary and critical value.

On the other hand, the use of images, historical contextualization, and guided discussions appeared to have partially mitigated these barriers, facilitating the understanding of the stories and their social implications. As Alves (2019) observes, literary works, even those written in another era, enable interaction with other fields of knowledge

while allowing for reflection on the present and providing information that arouses curiosity and interest in the culture, customs, and traditions of both distant and familiar individuals.

3.5 Engagement and interest in the educational process

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The fifth category identified relates to student engagement and interest in the learning process through an interdisciplinary approach. Many responses demonstrated curiosity, enthusiasm, and satisfaction with the methodology employed.

Comments such as “I became more interested in learning,” “I liked mixing the subjects,” “Now I understand what interdisciplinarity means,” “I realized that sports also have a history,” “Yes, I want to learn more about this,” and “The stories were powerful, I want to read more” show that the interdisciplinary strategy succeeded in motivating students, sparking their curiosity and interest in learning.

The use of visual resources such as paintings and historical images seems to have contributed to increasing student engagement, making the content more tangible and relevant. Mattos (2017, p. 92) emphasizes, “Afro-Brazilian art is a complex theme that requires an interdisciplinary approach.” The author adds, “As a category of visual art, it cannot be defined as a style or school, since it is connected to the socio-historical context of individuals and their environment.” Likewise, presenting biographical aspects of Machado de Assis expanded the understanding of his historical significance, stimulating greater interest in his work.

The responses indicate that literature, when properly contextualized and integrated with other areas of knowledge, can promote not only cognitive development but also meaningful changes in students’ awareness and attitudes, awakening their curiosity and deepening their engagement in the learning process.

4 Final considerations

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The research confirmed the hypothesis that it is possible to promote interdisciplinary work between the areas of Languages and Human Sciences through Machado de Assis's short stories *Pai contra Mãe* (*Father versus Mother*) and *O Caso da Vara* (*The Rod Case*), contributing to anti-racist education in the final years of elementary school. The analysis of students' responses revealed that the interdisciplinary approach was well received and had a positive impact on learning.

The results indicate that students broadened their historical and cultural understanding of slavery and racism, recognizing their structural nature and manifestations in contemporary society. The emotional weight of the short stories, combined with historical contextualization, supported the development of a critical stance toward racism, contributing to the formation of more aware and engaged citizens.

Students' recognition of interdisciplinarity demonstrates the potential of this strategy for addressing complex themes such as ethnic-racial issues. The integration of different areas of knowledge provided a broader and more contextualized view of the subject, enriching the learning experience.

On the other hand, the challenges related to linguistic difficulties point to the need for pedagogical strategies that facilitate students' access to classical literature, making it more accessible and relevant. Teacher guidance, the use of visual resources, and historical contextualization are essential for overcoming these barriers and for promoting a better understanding of the texts and their social implications.

The experience reported reinforces the importance of literature as an educational tool for fostering reflection on history and social relations. The interdisciplinary approach proved effective in deepening students' understanding and in making learning more meaningful.

For future research, it is recommended to explore strategies that stimulate greater student interest in reading classical literature, seeking ways to adapt literary genres in order

to make them more attractive to today's youth without compromising their literary or critical value.

In sum, the interdisciplinary didactic sequence based on Machado's short stories proved to be a valuable resource for promoting anti-racist education, helping to form critical students who are aware of social inequalities and committed to the struggle for racial equality.

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