

Learning otherwise: Teacher agency and decolonial praxis in Brazil

Aprender de outro modo: Ação docente e práxis decolonial no Brasil

Apprendre autrement: Action enseignante et pratique décoloniale au Brésil

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the call for decolonial reform in education has intensified, especially in Global South contexts shaped by enduring colonial legacies. This article explores how Brazilian Language and Literature teachers engage in decolonial pedagogical practices that resist Eurocentric norms and promote epistemic justice and student well-being. Grounded in decolonial theory and Freirean pedagogy, the study draws on qualitative data from surveys and in-depth interviews with eleven secondary school teachers working in diverse educational settings. The analysis highlights five thematic strategies these educators employ: reconfiguring classroom space, centering Black and Indigenous voices, subverting chronological literary norms, integrating Afro-Brazilian religiosity, including its spiritual and cultural dimensions, orality, and embracing emotion, creativity, and play as pedagogical tools. These practices constitute a radical shift from dominant educational models by foregrounding relationality, embodiment, and epistemological plurality. The findings underscore that decolonial pedagogy is not a fixed model but an ethical and political commitment enacted through everyday classroom decisions. By documenting these acts of pedagogical insurgency, the study contributes to international debates on equity in education. It affirms the transformative potential of teacher agency in dismantling colonial structures, promoting holistic student well-being, and imagining liberatory educational futures.

Keywords: decolonial pedagogy, epistemic justice, teacher agency, language and literature education, Afro-diasporic knowledge

Resumo

Nas últimas duas décadas, o apelo a uma reforma decolonial na educação intensificou-se, especialmente em contextos do Sul Global marcados por legados coloniais persistentes. Este artigo explora como os/as professores/as brasileiros/as de Língua e Literatura se envolvem em práticas pedagógicas decoloniais que resistem às normas eurocêntricas e promovem a justiça epistémica e o bem-estar dos/as alunos/as. Fundamentado na teoria decolonial e na pedagogia freiriana, o estudo recorre a dados qualitativos provenientes de questionários e entrevistas em profundidade a 11 professores/as do ensino secundário a trabalhar em diversos contextos educativos. A análise destaca cinco estratégias

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temáticas utilizadas por estes/as educadores/as: reconfiguração do espaço da sala de aula, centralização das vozes negras e indígenas, subversão das normas literárias cronológicas, integração da religiosidade afro-brasileira, incluindo as suas dimensões espiritual e cultural, oralidade e valorização da emoção, da criatividade e do jogo como ferramentas pedagógicas. Estas práticas constituem uma mudança radical em relação aos modelos educativos dominantes, ao privilegiarem a relacionalidade, a corporalidade e a pluralidade epistemológica. Os resultados realçam que a pedagogia decolonial não é um modelo fixo, mas um compromisso ético e político concretizado através de decisões quotidianas na sala de aula. Ao documentar estes atos de insurgência pedagógica, o estudo contribui para os debates internacionais sobre a equidade na educação. Afirma o potencial transformador da ação docente no desmantelamento das estruturas coloniais, na promoção do bem-estar integral dos/as alunos/as e na construção de futuros educativos libertadores.

Palavras-chave: pedagogia decolonial, justiça epistêmica, agência docente, ensino de língua e literatura, saberes afro-diaspóricos

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les appels à une réforme décoloniale de l'éducation se sont intensifiés, notamment dans les pays du Sud marqués par un héritage colonial persistant. Cet article explore comment les professeurs de langue et de littérature brésiliens mettent en œuvre des pratiques pédagogiques décoloniales qui s'opposent aux normes eurocentriques et promeuvent la justice épistémique et le bien-être des élèves. Fondée sur la théorie décoloniale et la pédagogie de Freire, l'étude utilise des données qualitatives issues de questionnaires et d'entretiens approfondis menés auprès de onze professeurs du secondaire exerçant dans divers contextes éducatifs. L'analyse met en lumière cinq stratégies thématiques employées par ces enseignants: la reconfiguration de l'espace de la classe, la mise en avant des voix noires et autochtones, la subversion des normes littéraires chronologiques, l'intégration de la religiosité afro-brésilienne, y compris ses dimensions spirituelles et culturelles, l'oralité, et la valorisation des émotions, de la créativité et du jeu comme outils pédagogiques. Ces pratiques constituent une rupture radicale avec les modèles éducatifs dominants, privilégiant la relationnalité, la corporéité et la pluralité épistémologique. Les résultats soulignent que la pédagogie décoloniale n'est pas un modèle figé, mais un engagement éthique et politique qui se concrétise par des choix quotidiens en classe. En documentant ces actes de contestation pédagogique, l'étude contribue aux débats internationaux sur l'équité en éducation. Elle affirme le potentiel transformateur de l'action pédagogique pour démanteler les structures coloniales, promouvoir le bien-être intégral des élèves et construire un avenir éducatif émancipateur.

Mots-clés: pédagogie décoloniale, justice épistémique, agentivité enseignante, enseignement de langue et littérature, savoirs afro-diasporiques

Introduction

This article presents findings from a doctoral research project between 2019 and 2023, examining how Brazilian secondary school educators mobilize decolonial pedagogical practices in Language and Literature classrooms. Since the early 2000s, decolonial studies have coalesced around the Modernity/Coloniality collective (a genealogy briefly outlined later in the paper). Our contribution is to trace an emergent, still-developing dialogue between that corpus and teachers' situated repertoires: the doctoral study that launches this article documents how educators translate and rework decolonial concepts in everyday pedagogy, and together with companion texts discussed ahead, shows where this interface is new and where its originality lies.

Rooted in the understanding that education plays a fundamental role in shaping individual and collective well-being, the study explores how decolonial approaches can create more just, inclusive, and affirming learning environments. In a national context marked by enduring colonial legacies and persistent social inequalities, promoting epistemic justice through education becomes not only a political and pedagogical

act but also an ethical commitment to the well-being of students historically excluded from hegemonic narratives. We publish in English to facilitate international circulation and to foster South–South dialogues while foregrounding Brazilian scholarship.

In recent decades, calls for decolonial reform in education have gained increasing traction, especially in postcolonial and Global South contexts where knowledge production continues to reflect asymmetrical power relations. This research investigates how Brazilian educators challenge Eurocentric paradigms and re-center historically marginalized ways of knowing, particularly those grounded in Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous epistemologies. By making intentional curricular and pedagogical choices, the participating teachers affirm plural worldviews, foster critical thinking, and cultivate spaces of recognition and belonging—essential conditions for the holistic well-being of students in diverse educational settings. So, our research questions are: 1) How do Brazilian language and literature teachers enact decolonial practices? 2) What forms of teacher agency become visible under policy and curricular constraints?

Drawing from the theoretical contributions of the Modernity/Coloniality Group¹—such as Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) concept of the “coloniality of power”—alongside Brazilian thinkers like Paulo Freire² (1970, 1996) and Lélia Gonzalez (1988), the study conceptualizes decoloniality as both a political stance and an ethical orientation in education. This framework interrogates dominant assumptions about whose knowledge is legitimized, which bodies are authorized to teach and learn, and what forms of expression are deemed valid. “There is no such thing as neutral education (...) it becomes the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1970).

To investigate how this orientation materializes in everyday school settings, the study employed qualitative methods, including a survey and in-depth interviews with eleven public school educators working in diverse Brazilian regions and institutional contexts. These teachers describe how they reconfigure classroom space, challenge canonical norms, and engage students as active participants in producing knowledge. Their accounts provide rich, grounded examples of decolonial principles enacted through dialogic, relational, and culturally rooted pedagogical strategies.

Ultimately, this article contributes to broader debates on equity in education by offering insights into how grassroots educational practices can confront systemic exclusions and foster more inclusive learning environments. In doing so, it sheds light on the teacher agency’s transformative potential in reimagining the content and structure of formal education. The findings reaffirm that pedagogical justice is not an abstract ideal, but a lived, ongoing process shaped by educators who dare to teach otherwise.

¹ This group of Latin American scholars emerged at the turn of the 21st century with the aim of challenging dominant narratives of modernity through a decolonial lens. It includes thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, among others. Their reflections are grounded in a critical analysis of the European project of modernity, arguing that modernity cannot be separated from its historical counterpart: coloniality. According to this perspective, coloniality is a persistent structure of power that extends beyond the colonial period, shaping social, cultural, and economic relations to this day. The collective seeks to expose these ongoing dynamics and to propose alternatives that elevate knowledge systems and practices historically marginalized by Western hegemonic discourse.

² Paulo Freire, in *Letters to Guinea-Bissau: Records of an Ongoing Experience* (1978), expands on his reflections regarding education as a practice of freedom, adapting his principles to the context of a country undergoing decolonization. Freire argues that education must be a collective process of knowledge construction, deeply rooted in the cultural and social realities of learners. He emphasizes the importance of dialogue and critical consciousness as means to transform oppressive structures. These ideas are central to this research, which is guided by the pursuit of pedagogical practices that foster the decolonization of knowledge and promote social justice.

Empirically, we analyze material from a national survey and 11 in-depth interviews to illustrate concrete decolonial practices in Language and Literature classrooms. Theoretically, we refine the link between epistemic justice and teacher agency in the Brazilian meso-context, specifying how institutional constraints shape—without fully determining—teachers’ possibilities for action.

2. Theoretical perspectives

To situate our theoretical contribution within Brazil’s meso-level scholarship, we conducted a systematic search (2015–2022) across PUC-Rio’s integrated databases (Portal CAPES, Projeto Maxwell, among others) using the terms “*Literatura*”, “*Decolonialidade*”, “*Ensino*,” and related variants. The search returned 12 records; close inspection shows that only five substantively engage the Humanities/Education interface, indicating both a recent uptake and a limited consolidation of the field. This corpus nevertheless evidences productive crossings between decolonial critique and textual/curricular practice: Castro (2018) leverages Black literature to interrogate juridical coloniality; Melchiades (2021) reads Angolan fiction as counter-colonial action; Cunha (2021) examines trans authorship to foreground race/gender dissidence as decolonial critique; Gebelucha (2019) documents Guarani mythic narratives as contemporary Indigenous resistance; and Coelho (2020) exposes how Science teacher education often reproduces colonial neutrality. Building on these dialogues, my study advances an education-and-literature-centered lens that follows teachers’ concrete curricular moves in Portuguese Language and Literature classrooms (Russell, 2023).

Foregrounding Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous epistemologies, the article takes seriously Gonzalez’s theorization of *Pretoguês* as an epistemic and political language practice that reorders hierarchy in the very domain of linguistic legitimacy. In parallel, research on Guarani narrative traditions demonstrates Indigenous knowledge as living pedagogy and territorial-linguistic defense (Gebelucha, 2019).

This study is theoretically anchored in the epistemological and political framework of decolonial thought, particularly the contributions of the Modernity/Coloniality Group, as developed by thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano (2000), Walter Dignolo (2007), and Catherine Walsh (2009). In dialogue with Brazilian theorists and educators, including Paulo Freire (1991, 1996) and Lélia Gonzalez (1988), this research explores how pedagogical practices can operate as sites of resistance and cultural re-existence in the teaching of Language and Literature.

The central concept that organizes the study is *decoloniality*, which Quijano (2000) defines as a critical response to the *coloniality of power*—a matrix of domination that outlived the formal colonial period and continues to structure hierarchies of knowledge, race, and labor in the modern world. For Quijano and his interlocutors, modernity is not separable from colonialism; it is its product and perpetrator. As such, the project of decoloniality is not merely additive or reformist—it seeks to dismantle epistemological monocultures and reposition knowledge that has been historically subordinated or erased.

In education, decoloniality translates into questioning whose knowledge is legitimized, whose languages are valued, whose histories are told, and whose subjects are authorized to speak and teach. Following Catherine Walsh (2009), decoloniality is not a theory to be applied but a process, an ongoing praxis of

thinking, doing, and being otherwise. In decolonial pedagogical debates, we understand decolonial pedagogies as emerging from collective creation and engagement with local knowledge and experiences, and as going beyond the mere introduction of content about Afro or Indigenous peoples, since what is ultimately at stake is the colonial logic of knowledge and being that structures education.

Drawing from Freirean pedagogy, this research embraces education as a space for political consciousness and transformation. Freire's (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a foundational critique of the *banking model of education*, in which students are treated as passive recipients of content. Instead, he proposes a dialogical and problem-posing education in which learners and educators co-construct knowledge through reflection and action. In *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1991), Freire describes the Culture Circles—a pedagogical format grounded in horizontal relations and oral traditions—as a method to interrogate reality and generate critical consciousness (*conscientização*) collectively. These principles resonate deeply with the decolonial emphasis on relationality, embodiment, and insurgent knowledge production.

In Brazil, authors such as Lélia Gonzalez (1988) have played a pivotal role in articulating the intersections between race, language, and identity. Her notion of *Pretuguês*³, a Black vernacular rooted in Afro-Brazilian linguistic traditions, reclaims linguistic difference as a marker of power and cultural affirmation. Gonzalez's insights are especially relevant when analyzing how educators in this study incorporate Afro-diasporic languages, rhythms, and narratives into their curricula. These practices do not merely diversify content; they disrupt hegemonic norms that have historically privileged whiteness and Eurocentrism in teaching Portuguese language and literature.

These strands intersect with Brazil's school mandates, e.g., the legal requirement to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture—but they move beyond mere content insertion. They demand a reworking of interpretive frameworks, reading routines, and the speech genres that organize classroom interaction. In my sample, teachers operationalize this by making Afro-diasporic voices, oralities, and rhythms the organizing principles of textual study rather than additive topics (Russell, 2023), thereby sustaining robust engagement with specialized literatures on Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous epistemologies.

Another key category is the curriculum itself, which is treated here as both a prescriptive document and a site of negotiation. Following Silva (1996), the curriculum operates on two levels: the *explicit* (formalized through national guidelines and textbooks) and the *hidden* (embodied in classroom interactions, expectations, and silences). The hidden curriculum, often unspoken, transmits dominant ideologies, racial hierarchies, and gender norms, reinforcing the exclusion of marginalized groups. Yet, as Silva argues, educators retain agency to subvert and reimagine both the official curriculum (e.g., the BNCC)⁴ and the hidden one through counter-hegemonic practices anchored in students' lived realities and cultural references.

³ *Pretuguês* is a term coined by Afro-Brazilian intellectual Lélia Gonzalez, combining the words *preto* (Black) and *português* (Portuguese). It refers to a mode of linguistic and cultural expression rooted in Afro-Brazilian experiences. *Pretuguês* challenges the hegemonic norms of standard Portuguese by affirming Black identity, oral traditions, and resistance through everyday language. It reveals how African diasporic influences have shaped the vernacular and culture in Brazil, often unacknowledged in formal education.

⁴ Brazil's national K–12 curricular framework issued by the Ministry of Education (2017–2018). It is deliberately broad and generalist—designed to cover a vast, diverse country—setting common competencies while leaving systems and teachers to operationalize specific contents, texts, and methods locally. Rather than prescribing fixed topic/author lists, it defines learning goals to be detailed by state/municipal curricula and lesson plans.

The literature on decolonial pedagogies in Brazil has grown in response to Law 10.639/03, a federal mandate enacted in 2003 that requires teaching African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in all schools. Rooted in decades of activism by Black educators and social movements, the law represents both a legal obligation and a pedagogical milestone aimed at confronting structural racism and epistemic erasure. While it opens space for Afro-diasporic knowledge, religions, and literature to be treated as central to national education, its implementation has been uneven and unfolds within the standardizing pressures of the BNCC and external assessments, often relying on the agency of individual teachers to translate legal guarantees into new practice.

Scholars such as Machado and Soares (2021) argue that a genuinely decolonial literature education must go beyond curriculum reform to challenge the interpretive frameworks and reading rituals that continue to exclude subaltern voices. They propose an approach in which listening to historically silenced authors is not an addition but a radical reconfiguration of the literary canon.

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This research also draws from Russell's (2024) analysis of decolonial education, which emphasizes that critical pedagogies must be rooted in teachers' situated knowledge and ethical commitment to social justice. Russell articulates that to teach from a decolonial perspective is to engage in the act of epistemic disobedience—it is to choose to hear what the system trains us to ignore and to teach what the curriculum often refuses to name. This insight is particularly relevant to this study, which foregrounds the testimonies of teachers who, through everyday acts of resistance—such as rearranging classroom furniture, including Black authors, or inviting oral traditions—challenge the coloniality embedded in school practices.

Crucially, the analysis situates teacher agency within Brazil's broader sociopolitical and institutional conditions. The uneven enactment of race-curriculum legislation, managerial control over pacing and assessment, and gaps in initial/ongoing teacher education constrain the scope of pedagogical experimentation. In this environment, decolonial pedagogy appears not as voluntarism but as negotiated praxis: rearranging classroom space, reframing canon and genre, and legitimizing non-dominant language practices function as micro-disruptions that are materially and bureaucratically costly (Russell, 2023). Reading my data alongside meso-level studies (Castro, 2018; Coelho, 2020; Cunha, 2021; Gebelucha, 2019; Melchiades, 2021) clarifies both the possibilities and limits of such agency, countering any overestimation while specifying mechanisms of change.

Taken together, this positioning strengthens consistency, currency, and depth in the conceptual frame. It links modernity/coloniality and Freirean dialogics to Brazil's meso-level production, while specifying how Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous knowledge reorganize the curriculum as practice. The article's originality lies in articulating a literature-in-education perspective that (i) documents a sparse yet growing national conversation, (ii) theorizes decoloniality through classroom-level mechanisms (reordering, curricular reframing, relational/emodied pedagogy), and (iii) demonstrates how these mechanisms emerge under concrete institutional constraints (Russell, 2023). This triangulation addresses the reviewers' concerns and situates the findings in dialogue with prior research rather than apart from it.

Ultimately, this section presents not a static theoretical framework but a constellation of interrelated perspectives that inform the analysis: decoloniality, Freirean pedagogy, curriculum theory, critical race studies, and Afro-diasporic epistemologies. These strands converge in the voices of the educators interviewed, who enact pedagogical insurgency no matter what they teach or where and why they teach. Their practices constitute a form of *rupture*: a refusal to reproduce the structures of invisibility that have historically marginalized their students and communities.

3. Methods

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) under protocol no. 046/2021. Grounded in a critical and decolonial epistemology, the research design prioritized educators' narratives and lived experiences, recognizing them as intellectuals and change agents. Rather than treating participants as mere data sources, the methodology aligned with Paulo Freire's (1996) notion of dialogic engagement, acknowledging their voices as legitimate knowledge production sites.

The methodological approach guided the study's commitment to uncovering pedagogical practices that resist colonial norms. A two-phase recruitment process was conducted. Initially, a detailed online questionnaire was distributed to educators with experience or interest in decolonial education, collecting baseline data on materials, strategies, and curricular decisions while also identifying potential interviewees. Recruitment combined the researcher's professional networks—as a practicing teacher and university instructor in Rio de Janeiro — with institutional channels: the researcher invited colleagues to share the survey with their staff via departmental listservs and WhatsApp groups, and used PUC-Rio mailing lists to reach university-affiliated school teachers and supervisors, which broadened the audience beyond the researcher's immediate school network. We reached 117 teachers. In the second phase, snowball sampling (Costa, 2018) asked respondents to nominate peers engaged in similar practices, expanding the pool across multiple schools and municipalities. The final sample comprised 11 Language and Literature teachers working in public and private systems and with diverse training/teaching profiles.

We also make explicit the study's limits and gains. Constraints included the pandemic context (online data collection; reduced opportunities for in-person observation), reliance on self-report, and network-based recruitment that can overrepresent motivated practitioners. At the same time, the online and peer-

mediated strategy increased geographic reach within the state and scheduling flexibility. The sample was largely concentrated in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area (a historically salient educational setting that concentrates teacher-education programs, cultural institutions, and policy actors, and that hosted the first seat of the Portuguese royal court in Brazil), helping shape enduring school cultures and canon formation. We therefore treat these cases as situated exemplars rather than statistically representative trends, using them to illuminate feasible repertoires and constraints in real contexts.

The final sample included eleven educators working in public and private institutions across various levels of Brazilian basic education. Their academic backgrounds ranged from bachelor's to doctoral degrees, specializing in Language and Literature, Afro-Brazilian Studies, and Critical Pedagogy. Selection was based on demonstrated engagement with inclusive and counter-hegemonic teaching. All participant names are pseudonyms, following ethical research protocols.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all data were collected through semi-structured online interviews. Though initially seen as a limitation, the virtual format facilitated broader geographic participation and more flexible scheduling. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was recorded with informed consent. The interview guide encouraged participants to reflect on curriculum design, classroom dynamics, material choices, and the challenges and motivations shaping their pedagogy.

Thematic analysis was the primary analytic method, offering a structured yet flexible framework to identify, code, and interpret patterns in participants' narratives. This recursive process generated thematic categories (curriculum subversion, student protagonism, and embodied learning), which were then critically examined through decoloniality and Freirean pedagogy.

Several limitations shaped the research context. Pandemic restrictions altered classroom realities, compelling educators to adapt decolonial practices to digital platforms. The reliance on self-reporting introduced subjectivity, which was embraced as a methodological strength, consistent with the study's epistemological commitment to honoring lived experience (Freire, 1991; Walsh, 2013).

Ultimately, the study's methodological rigor stems from the coherence between its research questions, critical epistemological stance, and data collection strategies. By centering the voices of educators actively resisting hegemonic models, this inquiry not only documents pedagogical insurgency but also affirms the transformative potential of teacher agency in advancing decolonial futures.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents and analyzes selected themes from the narratives of eleven Brazilian Language and Literature educators engaging in decolonial pedagogical practices. First, here, we explicitly situate teachers' practices within Brazil's broader sociopolitical terrain. Brazil is a multiethnic, plurilingual, and profoundly mestizo society shaped by the legacies of enslavement, Indigenous dispossession, and successive migration waves. Over the past two decades, in the Education area, federal legislation has sought to confront racial erasure (first through Law 10.639/2003 (African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture) and subsequently

through Law 11.645/2008 (adding Indigenous histories and cultures)). While these mandates legitimize Afro-Indigenous knowledge in schools, their uptake is uneven across regions and school systems, constrained by local politics, resource disparities, and enduring religious/racial intolerance. In this context, the practices described here should be read as responses to structural inequities rather than as isolated choices, aiming to translate legal guarantees into everyday pedagogy.

It is important to delimit the scope of this investigation: the study identifies and analyzes good practices, situated repertoires that, while not universalizable, exemplify feasible, intentional, and reflexive enactments of decolonial pedagogy in everyday schooling. A prior mapping procedure was used: participating teachers completed a structured questionnaire on how they approached themes and authors in the classroom, alongside a self-declaration of conscious decolonial engagement; these responses guided sample selection and ensured theory–practice alignment. The aim was not to diagnose the problems of a continental-scale country, as Brazil, but to illuminate concrete pathways and pedagogical intentionalities of teachers who know and mobilize decolonial principles. Accordingly, the analytically grounded cases are offered as adaptable exemplars, sources of inspiration, and orientation—rather than prescriptive templates for system-wide adoption.

Historically, the Brazilian classroom has been engineered as a device of ordering: rows of desks, closed doors, bell-timed schedules, standardized assessment, and a teacher-centered authority charged with delivering content aligned to prescribed curricula. It is within this spatial, temporal, and institutional arrangement (an heir to a Eurocentric civilizational project) that the practices analyzed here operate as concrete disruptions: they reconfigure space (circles, floor work, movement), redistribute voice and authorship, integrate body, affect, and ancestry, and position students as subjects of knowledge. This study maps these shifts, recognizing teachers as producers of situated pedagogical knowledge, and interprets them in dialogue with critical and decolonial scholarship (Quijano/Mignolo; Walsh; Lugones, for example) so as to avoid both mere description and an uncritical celebration of teacher agency.

While the broader study identified five central axes of action, this article focuses on those most relevant to its analytical scope and contribution to international debates on equity and curriculum transformation. Drawing on their lived experiences, each theme illustrates how these teachers challenge the colonial logic embedded in curricula, classroom space, teaching methodologies, and knowledge validation. These acts of pedagogical insurgency not only resist violence but also cultivate spaces of recognition, dignity, and belonging—essential dimensions of student well-being. The findings do not represent a universal model but reveal a diverse and situated repertoire of transformative practices that affirm relationality, embodiment, and epistemological plurality as foundations for a more just and nurturing educational experience.

4.1. Rethinking space and pedagogical authority

The reconfiguration of classroom space is a key strategy for disrupting hierarchical and colonial teaching models. Educators deliberately challenge the “banking model of education” (Freire, 1970) by modifying their classrooms’ physical and symbolic arrangements to promote dialogue, co-agency, and bodily presence.

These spatial interventions not only foster more democratic and participatory learning environments but also contribute to students' holistic well-being by affirming their presence, voice, and right to belong within the educational space.

Teacher Joana⁵, for instance, links spatial reorganization to the rejection of rationalist and disembodied learning expectations:

It may seem simple, but the expectation that a student sits still and pays attention for six or seven hours reflects a rationalist epistemology that ignores the body. However, the body aches, gets hungry, and needs movement. (...) We must recognize that the mind and body are not separate—and in a college prep context, students are not machines. (Joana, 2021)

This practice echoes Freire's (1996) notion of Culture Circles, which reject top-down instruction and instead foster collective inquiry through circular seating and horizontal interaction. The emphasis on bodily knowledge also resonates with Catherine Walsh's (2013) idea of "insurgent practices of (re)existence," in which the sensory, emotional, and spatial dimensions of learning are re-signified. As Walsh (2018) states, "learning in and with the body, through emotion, relation, and memory, is necessary for epistemic justice".

Teacher Camila's "Black Women and Literature Workshop" offers another example:

We have a specific room, the Portuguese Language room, with no desks; instead, we have sofas, mats, and cushions, and the workshops take place on the floor, in a circle, during lunchtime. (...) It is about making the student a protagonist, giving them tools to produce what they learn. (Camila, 2021)

Camila's spatial reorganization enables a pedagogy of care, orality, and proximity that aligns with Afro-diasporic epistemologies (Ribeiro, 2019). The classroom becomes a relational space that nurtures co-authorship and belonging.

Similarly, teacher Sara⁶ subverts traditional teacher authority by inviting students to critique her perspectives:

I prefer reading circles and shared reading. (...) I tell my students, 'I am not perfect. You can question me.' That, for me, is an insurgent act. (Sara, 2021)

Sara reclaims vulnerability as a pedagogical strength by undermining the teacher's infallibility and affirming reciprocal knowledge-making. These spatial and relational shifts contest colonial pedagogical structures and foster classrooms of mutual respect and shared authorship.

Another prominent strategy in the participants' pedagogical repertoire is the deliberate inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and peripheral authors and epistemologies in curricular selection. This commitment goes beyond representation: it seeks to invert hierarchies and affirm the legitimacy of historically silenced voices. By doing so, these educators create curricular spaces where students from marginalized backgrounds can see their histories, languages, and worldviews acknowledged and valued as sources of knowledge.

⁵ Joana is a high school and university teacher, approximately 35 to 40 years old. She holds degrees in Social Communication and Portuguese Language and Literatures from a state university, and a PhD in Education from the same institution. With over ten years of teaching experience, she currently works as a substitute professor at a public university. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, she also taught in basic education at a private school.

⁶ Sara teaches at both the lower and upper levels of primary education. She is between 50 and 60 years old. In addition to holding an undergraduate degree from a private university, she has specialized in Neuropedagogy and Educational Psychoanalysis. She has been working in schools—primarily private institutions—for over ten years.

Such curricular choices are not merely political but also deeply ethical, as they restore what Kristie Dotson (2011) terms *well-being*—the condition in which individuals and communities can participate in knowledge practices without suffering dismissal, misrecognition, or silencing. In this light, centering Black and marginalized voices becomes a form of pedagogical care that nurtures students’ sense of dignity, belonging, and cognitive justice. It contributes to educational well-being by fostering environments where all students, particularly those most often excluded, can engage with the curriculum as subjects of knowledge, not merely its objects.

As teacher Camila⁷ explains:

Black women are often seen as the ‘other of the other.’ By giving visibility to their work, other subjectivities are empowered to exist differently. (...) We privilege Black authorship in every lesson. I have never been questioned about not including white authors—they are everywhere. (Camila, 2021)

Her curricular approach embodies what Machado and Soares (2021) call a “revolutionary beginning,” whereby subaltern voices are not added to the canon but repositioned at the center. Camila’s strategy confronts the assumed universality of whiteness in literary education, aligning with Mignolo’s (2011) advocacy for “epistemic disobedience”, thinking and teaching against the grain of colonial logic.

Teacher Joana echoes this when connecting her syllabus choices to her lack of recognition during her education:

If I have a syllabus that is full of white men, my students from UERJ⁸ in Maracanã⁹ will struggle to recognize themselves, just as I had difficulty recognizing myself. (Joana, 2021)

Joana’s reflection aligns with Nilma Lino Gomes’ (2007) critique of the curriculum as a site of subjectivation, where particular identities are made visible and others erased. Her practice reclaims curricular space for self-recognition and identity affirmation.

Teacher Vitória¹⁰ offers a concrete example of integrating Afro-Brazilian language and culture into grammar lessons:

It was subversion because I did not stop working on figures of speech or anything, but I brought elements of *jongo*¹¹ into this analysis space. (...) ‘*tava drumindo, cangoma me chamou,*’ what was ‘*drumindo,*’ which was ‘*dormindo*’... and then I talked about *Pretoguês*, by Lélia Gonzalez. (Vitória, 2021)

Here, Vitória aligns standard content with Afro-Brazilian linguistic expression, affirming Pretoguês—a term coined by Gonzalez (1988) to reclaim the Black vernacular as a site of epistemic richness. Her lesson

⁷ Camila is a teacher for Middle School and High School, aged between 30 and 40 years old. She holds a degree in Portuguese – Literatures in Portuguese Language from a federal university and has a master’s degree in Education from a private university. With over 15 years of teaching experience, she currently works at a federal public school.

⁸ State University of Rio de Janeiro.

⁹ Maracanã is a neighborhood located in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It is best known for the iconic Maracanã Stadium, but it is also home to several public universities, including the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

¹⁰ Vitória is a teacher for Middle School and High School, aged between 40 and 50 years old. She holds a degree in Letters - Portuguese - Literatures in Portuguese Language from a State University. With over 25 years of teaching experience, she has a master’s degree in Letters. She works in private school settings.

¹¹ *Jongo* is an Afro-Brazilian cultural expression that combines music, dance, and oral poetry. It originated among enslaved Africans in southeastern Brazil and is traditionally performed in community gatherings with call-and-response singing, percussive rhythms, and circular dances. Recognized as a form of intangible cultural heritage, *jongo* carries ancestral knowledge, resistance, and spirituality, and plays a significant role in preserving Afro-Brazilian memory and identity.

challenges linguistic normativity and celebrates language as a lived culture. As Gonzalez writes, “Pretoquês is not a deviation, but a political and cultural statement of resistance”.

Together, these educators enact a radical curricular reconfiguration that resists the reproduction of colonial canons and affirms the agency of marginalized communities. Their choices resonate with Freire’s principle that “to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (Freire, 1996).

4.3. Subverting chronological literary norms

The participants’ third significant strategy is disrupting linear and Eurocentric literary timelines. Rather than following the canonical trajectory that begins with Greco-Roman antiquity and culminates in modern European or Brazilian authors, several teachers inverted this order, starting instead with contemporary marginalized voices.

Teacher Hugo¹² describes this approach:

I try to invert the usual order. I begin by discussing contemporary Black literature, then return to texts considered ‘classics.’ When students engage with Machado de Assis after reading Black female authors, they ask different questions. They are not just looking at style or narrative technique. They are questioning the racial and social structures behind the text. (Hugo, 2021)

Hugo’s method reframes canonical literature through critical and racialized lenses, empowering students to interrogate historical erasures and power structures. This strategy exemplifies what Mignolo (2011) calls a decolonial shift, delinking from Eurocentric narratives of progress and authority.

Camila also critiques the dominant literary chronology:

Why do we always begin with the Greeks and Romans? Who benefits from that story? When we start with authors from the periphery, our students see literature as something alive and connected to them, not as something distant and imposed. (Camila, 2021)

Her reflection challenges the naturalization of Western origins in literary history and proposes a temporal reordering that foregrounds lived experiences and cultural resonances. This “temporal insurgency,” as Walsh (2018) suggests, subverts linear modernist time and opens curricular space for cyclical, relational, and ancestral temporalities often rooted in Afro-Indigenous cosmologies.

Rather than treating marginal authors as late additions to a supposedly complete canon, these educators reposition them as starting points. This inversion not only decenters Eurocentric teleologies but also equips students with critical tools to reinterpret the literary past from the standpoint of the present.

¹² Hugo is a high school teacher at a federal public school. He is between 50 and 60 years old. He holds a doctorate in Portuguese Language from a federal university and earned his undergraduate degree in Letters from a private institution. He has been working in the classroom for over 30 years.

4.4. Engaging Afro-Brazilian religiosity and orality

Another recurring theme is the integration of Afro-Brazilian religiosity and oral traditions into language and literature instruction. In a country with a long history of religious discrimination and racialized exclusion, this choice is both a pedagogical intervention and a political act of cultural affirmation.

In this aspect, teachers Fábio¹³ and Igor¹⁴ also emphasize discussing topics that align with Silva's (1996) ideological and pedagogical contributions. In his classes, Fábio addresses religious themes, for example, putting expressions of African matrix religions at the center of debates with his students.

This year, we adopted books for the first year of high school that addressed religious intolerance. We worked with texts considered canonical but also insurgent due to the themes they raised, such as *The Payment of Promises* by Dias Gomes [1959/2008], *The Head of the Saint* by Socorro Acioli [2014], and works by Itamar Vieira Junior [2019] and Reginaldo Prandi [2010] (*Aimô*). We discussed religion from various perspectives. Students researched the Yoruba pantheon and religious intolerance in Brazil, producing data and content presented during the School Event. (Fábio, 2021)

I teach in the “Literary Art Workshop” within the Arts Nuclei, which offers free classes—guitar, theater, music, and dance—for municipal students. We created songs for a festival based on African matrix cultural traditions and a book provided by the Municipal Department of Education. The project included teaching that Africa is a continent, not a country. One song focused on Exu and included a dance. We explored who Exu is and connected that to a student's experience, challenging the common association of Exu with evil. It was a meaningful project; that student must be about 25 years old today. (Igor, 2021)

Teachers Fábio and Igor emphasize the importance of addressing themes that align with the ideas presented by Silva (1996), particularly concerning cultural and religious diversity. Fábio describes an approach involving religious intolerance readings featuring canonical and insurgent authors. Students research Yoruba pantheons and religious intolerance, producing materials for cultural events. Igor, leading an “Artistic Literary Workshop,” composes songs inspired by African cultural traditions, fostering an understanding of Africa as a continent. He addresses the figure of Exu, connecting it to the often negative perception associated with this entity in Afro-Brazilian religions. Both approaches aim to broaden students' cultural and religious understanding.

Teacher Vitória also draws on oral and musical traditions:

There was music, there was percussion... and it was not just for fun—it brought joy, and students remembered it. It became a celebration and a challenge at the same time. (Vitória, 2021)

Her use of *jongo*—a rhythm and dance of African origin—not only animates grammar lessons but connects students to ancestral memory and affective learning. These practices contest the Cartesian split between emotion and cognition, aligning instead with Freire's (1996) claim that “education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage” (p. 38).

¹³ Fábio is a substitute teacher for High School and Higher Education. He is between 30 and 40 years old. He holds a degree in Letters from a state university, and his highest academic title is a doctorate in the field of Literature. With over 5 years of experience in the field, he has worked in both state and private schools.

¹⁴ Igor works primarily in Elementary School I and II in municipal schools and, in Higher Education, at a private institution. He is between 50 and 60 years old. He graduated in Letters from a private college and holds a doctorate from a federal university. With over 30 years of teaching experience, he has been imparting knowledge for several decades.

Including religiosity and orality reclaims epistemologies that have been historically criminalized or dismissed. It affirms students' cultural worlds as valid foundations for knowledge production and disrupts the presumed neutrality of the secular school space. These pedagogical moves offer a reparative and affirming approach to educational justice in a context still marked by racism.

4.5. Embracing emotion, creativity, and play as epistemic tools

A final theme that emerged with notable frequency was the intentional use of effect, imagination, and play as integral to decolonial pedagogy. This orientation contests dominant educational paradigms prioritizing rationality, standardization, and intellectual abstraction, legacies of colonial modernity that frame emotion and creativity as secondary or disruptive.

Teacher Joana offered a reflective account that reveals how these dimensions transform her classroom into a space of humanization:

The system still expects discipline and silence. However, how can students learn when their bodies are under pressure and their emotions are ignored? They carry hunger, trauma, joy, dreams—all of this should be part of the lesson. (Joana, 2021)

Her statement underscores that decolonial education must take students' emotional and bodily experiences seriously, an insight echoed by Freire (1996), who emphasized that “there is no such thing as a neutral education process” (p. 53). Emotions are not ancillary but central to students' capacity to engage, relate, and transform their realities.

Teacher Igor resorts to playfulness to develop a literary approach to socially relevant themes in his teaching context.

In an arts-based workshop, we used puppet theater (*mamulengo*, a traditional hand puppet from Brazil's Northeast) to explore themes from Afro-Brazilian culture. Each child chose a puppet to build a story, and we discussed authors like Machado de Assis and Lima Barreto. One Black girl refused to use the only Black puppet, associating it with negative, even demonic traits. When asked, “But aren't you Black too?” she began to cry. The moment was deeply emotional—it exposed how racism and colonial mindsets shape identity from early childhood. Using play and creativity as an entry point, we confronted that internalized oppression through dialogue and storytelling. (Igor, 2023)

Puppet theater is a methodological choice employed by the teacher to address an issue that, in his view, can be approached through decolonial perspectives. Using it, he believes that entertainment is a key to developing a literary and critical perception of the social reality surrounding him. In the recounted incident, he finds space to discuss racism, identify oppression, and the effect of coloniality on the mindset of his student, who struggles to portray a character whose skin tone is representative of her own. Evidently, in the narrated process, there is listening and a practice that involves recognizing pedagogical dynamism as an agent of social transformation. The teacher's provocation and the student's response communicate the effects of racism but also provide an opportunity to broaden the discussion, as names of highly relevant Black authors are invoked to deconstruct an opposing ideology in the face of the student's tearful reaction.

In one of Catherine Walsh's lectures, creativity is identified as one of the leading forces for decoloniality because, in her view, creation presupposes inventing novelty, responding to the pre-established models of the Global North that reference teaching practices. Therefore, teachers present methods, ways of doing, and ways of interpreting, guided by a theory that seeks different and communicative paths for the other (and themselves).

By embracing emotion, creativity, and play, these educators enact what can be described as a poetic pedagogy that reclaims students' full humanity. Their practices resist the logic of colonial control and open curricular spaces where critical thinking, artistic expression, and affective connection converge as vital components of epistemic justice.

Conclusion

This study has explored how Brazilian language and literature educators mobilize decolonial pedagogies to resist, subvert, and reimagine the colonial logic embedded in schooling. We make the analytical linkages explicit: the (re)organization of space and authority resonates with Freire's (1970, 1991, 1996) Culture Circles and Walsh's (2013) "insurgent practices of (re)existence"; the centrality of Black, Indigenous, and peripheral authors confronts the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000) and aims at well-being (Dotson, 2011), while also pressing on the official and hidden curricula (Silva, 1996); the inversion of canonical chronologies undertakes a "delinking" (Mignolo, 2011), enabling retroactive readings of the canon; the incorporation of Afro-diasporic oralities and religiosities connects school and community (Ribeiro, 2019); and affect, creation, and play affirm the inseparability of knowing, feeling, and embodying (Freire, 1970, 1996).

We also guard against overstating teacher agency: here it is treated as situated and negotiated—shaped by curriculum controls (the BNCC, textbooks, external assessments), unequal material conditions, political-religious disputes, and initial/continuing teacher education. The results, therefore, do not universalize "models"; they show possible micro-reconfigurations in real contexts and their formative effects—recognition, belonging, and the pluralization of references—while keeping limits and tensions in view. By anchoring the findings in Brazil's sociopolitical context and in direct dialogue with critical scholarship, the analysis supports the thesis that these practices constitute a radical shift from dominant models precisely because they privilege relationality, embodiment, and epistemic plurality, without losing sight of the conditions that enable and constrain them.

Through rich narratives and thematic analyses of their practices, it has become evident that decoloniality is not a static model to be implemented but a dynamic, relational, and context-driven process. The participating teachers reconfigure school space, center historically marginalized voices, disrupt canonical and chronological norms, affirm Afro-Brazilian religiosity and orality, and embrace emotion, creativity, and play as pedagogical strategies. These actions challenge the epistemological monoculture inherited from colonial modernity and open space for educational practices rooted in plurality, embodiment, and justice.

By refusing the rigidity of standardized curricula and the neutrality of hegemonic canons, these educators create classrooms where Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous, and peripheral knowledge are included and placed at the center of teaching and learning. Their pedagogical choices echo the insights of decolonial thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano, Catherine Walsh, Walter Dignolo, and Paulo Freire, reaffirming that education is a political terrain where power, knowledge, and identity are constantly negotiated. Importantly, this study underscores that the decolonial struggle within schools is not limited to content but extends to form, method, language, emotion, and time.

What makes this research especially relevant is its focus on lived practice. Rather than approaching decoloniality as a theoretical abstraction, it foregrounds the voices of educators who enact resistance daily, often in precarious conditions and without institutional support. Their work is a testament to the transformative power of teacher agency and collective imagination in confronting epistemic injustices and building more equitable futures. These educators teach against the grain, not merely transmitting knowledge but co-creating new forms of being, knowing, and relating with their students.

The originality of this study lies in its emphasis on the subtle, creative, and insurgent acts that comprise decolonial praxis in the classroom, from rearranging desks into circles to analyzing Black vernaculars to celebrating orality through drums and poetry. These small interventions accumulate into a decisive pedagogical shift that centers on dignity, reciprocity, and recognition. As such, this research contributes to curriculum studies, teacher education, and broader debates on epistemic justice and educational transformation in the Global South.

The findings reaffirm that education is not merely a tool for reproducing norms: it is a site of rupture, creation, and re-existence. The teachers in this study offer a vision of pedagogy deeply rooted in historical consciousness, ethical responsibility, and the poetic possibility of imagining otherwise. At a time when global inequalities, racism, and cultural erasures persist in educational systems, decolonial pedagogies provide a pathway toward more just, humane, and plural modes of teaching and learning. The struggle for decolonial education is ongoing, but the practices documented here illuminate that another curriculum is not only possible—it is already being woven into the fabric of classrooms by those who dare to teach otherwise.

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