

# Culture, diversity and deconstruction of prejudices in schools<sup>1</sup>

Cultura, diversidad y deconstrucción de prejuicios en las escuelas

Cultura, diversidade e desconstrução de preconceitos nas escolas

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## Abstract:

**Objective.** This research paper is aimed at identifying and analyzing relevant aspects concerning concepts as well as cultural and pedagogical practices related to the intended deconstruction of prejudices proposed by a project in the context of a public elementary school. **Method.** Participant observation procedures were adopted to investigate activities related to the project and semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with six educators. Furthermore, one focus group session was conducted with a class of 25 students in the 9th grade. **Results.** indicated successful work to achieve the intended objectives, as well as aspects that were obstacles. It was concluded that lectures are not enough to address sensitive issues linked to the deconstruction of prejudices, for educators' deep affective-laden values and beliefs can negatively interfere with their dialogical dispositions towards students. **Conclusion.** We claim that dialogical practices are crucial to help deconstruct prejudices and develop constructive relations among everyone, as they may work to foster social justice and democracy within schools and beyond. **Keywords:** prejudice, diversity, pedagogical practices, school.

## Resumen:

**Objetivo.** La presente investigación tuvo como objetivo identificar y analizar aspectos relevantes sobre conceptos, prácticas culturales y pedagógicas relacionadas con la deconstrucción de prejuicios propuesta por un proyecto en una escuela. **Método.** Se adoptaron procedimientos de observación participante para investigar las actividades relacionadas con el proyecto y se realizaron entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas con seis educadores. Además, se llevó a cabo una sesión de grupo focal con una clase de 25 estudiantes. **Resultados.** Los resultados indicaron un trabajo exitoso para lograr los objetivos previstos, así como aspectos que se interpusieron en el camino de los mismos. Se concluyó que conferencias no son suficientes para abordar cuestiones sensibles vinculadas a la deconstrucción de prejuicios, ya que los valores y creencias afectivamente cargados de los educadores pueden interferir negativamente en sus disposiciones dialógicas hacia los estudiantes. **Conclusión.** Afirmamos que prácticas dialógicas son cruciales para ayudar a deconstruir los prejuicios y desarrollar relaciones constructivas entre todos, ya que pueden fomentar la justicia social y la democracia.

**Palabras clave:** prejuicio, diversidad, prácticas pedagógicas, colegio.

## Resumo:

**Escopo.** O objetivo desta pesquisa foi identificar e analisar aspectos relevantes de conceitos, práticas culturais e pedagógicas relacionadas à desconstrução de preconceitos propostos por um projeto em uma escola. **Metodologia.** Adotaram-se procedimentos de observação participante para pesquisar as atividades relacionadas ao projeto e entrevistas individuais semiestructuradas com seis professores. Além disso, foi realizada uma sessão de grupo focal com uma turma de 25 alunos. **Resultados.** Os resultados indicaram um trabalho bem-sucedido para alcançar os objetivos planejados, bem como aspectos que os impediram. Concluiu-se que as palestras não são suficientes para abordar questões delicadas relacionadas à desconstrução de preconceitos, uma vez que os valores e crenças carregados afetivamente dos professores podem interferir negativamente em suas disposições dialógicas para

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com os estudantes. **Conclusão.** Afirmamos que as práticas dialógicas são fundamentais para ajudar a desconstruir preconceitos e desenvolver relações construtivas entre todos, pois podem promover a justiça social e a democracia.

**Palavras-chave:** preconceito, diversidade, práticas pedagógicas, escola.

## Introduction

The work carried out by educators is quite challenging. From the early years to the university, teachers must deal with a plurality of students and families from diverse realities characterized by different beliefs, values, religions, cultural practices, and identities. Among schools' objectives, from the initial years to university, we find the development of citizenship among students. They are expected to become conscious, committed, responsible, creative, and supportive individuals—together with the development of skills and abilities oriented to their future successful insertion in the labor market and accomplishment as individuals (Kohn, 1993; Meijers & Hermans, 2018). However, the school curriculum and educational institutions often fail to promote and achieve many of these goals due to their almost exclusive focus on transmitting specific knowledge, which privileges cognitive aspects of learning (Meijers & Hermans, 2018; Tanggaard, 2019). Consequently, issues concerning the promotion of social responsibility, citizenship and the socio-affective dimension of social relationships engendered within school contexts are mostly disregarded (Branco, 2018).

This scenario gets even more complex when we consider situations of violence, prejudice, discrimination and bullying at schools. It most likely reflects the violence we see in contemporary society because, after all, schools, as social institutions, tend to reproduce prejudices and discriminations found in the broader culture, working as agents of their maintenance (Louro, 1997; Madureira et al., 2021; Miskolci, 2007). However, as argued in this text, educators operate as active and constructive agents by introducing cultural changes in schools, which may result in the emergence of novel practices and values in the institutional context.

Despite the prevalent worrisome scenario, the belief that security should be granted through the control of bodies and minds still flourishes among most educators and families (Cohen, 2011; Louro, 1997; Madureira, et al., 2018; Miskolci, 2007). There is a widespread understanding among educators that schools need to focus on what really matters, which would be the acquisition of content and information; therefore, attention and discipline should be the only way to allow for successful learning among students. But how is it possible to educate autonomous, creative, responsible, and respectful citizens by simply “transmitting” content? The notion of transmission is not theoretically acceptable from a cultural psychology perspective. According to this approach, as individuals internalize social messages, they are always active or constructive to different degrees (Valsiner, 2014; 2021), so what is thought to be transmitted is, in fact, somehow transformed by the developing person. Instead of the illusory notion of “transmission” we should refer to the processes of knowledge co-construction that occur as teachers and students communicate within their classrooms. Moreover, the traditional, monological concept of transmission relates to attempts to simply impose values and knowledge from a vertical, non-dialogical perspective, to reproduce an authoritarian social order enforced by the system.

There are educators, notwithstanding, who are investing efforts in the opposite direction, trying to promote critical thinking and autonomy in their students. Educators who accept the challenge to educate towards democracy, who long to see schools as a safe and constructive environment for all school community members. Throughout Brazil and the world, schools have developed projects and programs to achieve social objectives and minimize violence; however, these results, need to be carefully scrutinized (Burket et al., 2018; Dungani & Souza, 2016; Fernandes et al., 2016). It is crucial to bring new evidence regarding such efforts, to join forces that make it possible to analyze their work, learning from professionals who try, to the best of their abilities, to reach their goals. By doing so, we hope to construct relevant knowledge about the topic. Successful experiences can teach us about the subtleties of their practices aiming to bring forth a democratic

education, revealing what is fruitful and works, and what are some of the major obstacles that would likely prevent well-intentioned educators from achieving the very objectives they want to promote.

The present study intended to collaborate with investigations focused on facing the challenge of deconstructing prejudices in school contexts. We cannot think of a genuinely democratic society without promoting people's respect toward each other, and schools, certainly, can become a relevant context to promote human and social development in our societies. Hence, the objective of the present investigation was to identify and analyze cultural and pedagogical practices as well as theoretical concepts that may help to analyze processes conducive to possible deconstructions of prejudices throughout specific activities proposed and developed by one specific project named as "Respect" (fictitious name), implemented in an Elementary public school in Brazil. Interviews with educators and a focus group with students were carried out, as well as participant observations of classroom activities and other contexts within the school.

The research was guided by a cultural psychology theoretical perspective, which conceives human development as a process occurring as individuals interact with others and the world, participating in plural and diverse cultural practices. These interactions are highly permeated with affectivity as well as cultural values that exist before individuals are even born (Valsiner, 2014; 2021). As stated, according to this perspective, culture is not just "transmitted" to individuals passively; it is internalized and externalized by active individuals over a constant process of co-construction and reconstruction of messages emerging in social interactions; that is, cultures and subjects are interdependently constitutive of one another (Valsiner, 2021).

A central aspect of the theory, the co-construction of meanings, occurs through processes of communication and metacommunication (Branco, 2018), so language, affectivity and dialogue are essential to understanding internalization processes that originate personal meanings, beliefs, and values, consequently, having a significant impact on human development. According to cultural psychology, practices and values construct each other as time goes by, and the role of human values, or hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields (Branco, 2018; Valsiner, 2021), is fundamental to make sense of processes of meaning construction and human development.

According to the *Affective Semiotic Regulatory Model* proposed by Valsiner (2014, 2021), cultural psychology conceives values and prejudices as hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields that ultimately guide human perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions (Branco, 2018). Valsiner (2014) elaborated a model composed of four hierarchical levels of affective-semiotic fields, from level 1 (comfort/discomfort sensations, first nuances of semiosis), to level 2 (when semiosis allows for the verbal nomination of emotions such as anger, fear or happiness), to level 3 (where feelings are difficult to describe verbally), up to level 4, where hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields become very powerful and affectively regulate the psyche. At this level, it is difficult to access and explain the strong motivational force driving one's feelings, thoughts, and actions by simply using language (Valsiner, 2014, 2021). As we will see later in this article, the theoretical proposal of this last level can be significantly productive in explaining the difficulties usually found in fostering the deconstruction of values and prejudices within school contexts.

The goal of our empirical study to approach the issue of deconstruction of prejudices in school contexts was to analyze relevant aspects of the implementation of a project named "Respect" (fictitious name) in a public Elementary school in Brasilia, Brazil (Paula & Branco, 2022). We interviewed members of staff and teachers responsible for the project, as well as a class of 25 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who were experiencing activities proposed by the project. Our primary goal, however, was to video-register and analyze in detail the dynamics of teacher-student interactions during one of the activities prescribed by the project. In the next section, the procedures adopted in the research are described, followed by the results and discussion of the study.

## Method

Aligned with the theoretical framework presented above, a qualitative methodology was applied, drawing from various procedures to make sense of the systemic, complex nature of the studied phenomena (Valsiner, 2017). Qualitative methods are particularly productive in research oriented to understand human psychological processes, such as those investigated here. Therefore, in this research, we made use of observations, interviews, and focus groups. Interviews are a privileged instrument in qualitative research because they give a window of access to participants' changes in terms of perspectives, beliefs, values, and motivations (Gaskell, 2002; Minayo, 2012), as the researcher and participants engage in dialogical processes of meaning co-construction (Valsiner, 2017).

Similarly, focus groups consist of another interesting research procedure to access participants' perspectives. Unlike interviews, though, they grant participants opportunities to listen and reflect upon multiple voices and points of view that emerge throughout the group process (Gaskell, 2002; Pereira & Sawaya, 2020). Both interviews and focus group sessions allow for greater in-depth analysis of subjective and intersubjective processes involved in the construction of participants' meanings. That is, through their use it is possible to understand, in-depth, the complexity of those beliefs and values that guide the worldview and practices of each participant (Marková et al. 2007).

To analyze in detail the dynamics of teachers-student interactions in the activities proposed by the project, we selected to video-record one of the activities, in which the teacher arranged to discuss with the class a short movie about young male homosexual affective orientation, for further full transcription and analysis.

## Participants

Six educators, two people from school administration and four teachers, participated in this study. Twenty-five students from the elementary public school's 9th grade also took part in the research.

## Instruments

The instruments applied in this study were a Field Diary to register the observations, an audio recording device for the interviews and the focus group session, the last was also recorded with a video device.

## Research procedures and ethical considerations

The procedures were (1) 58 hours of participant observations of school activities, especially those related to the project "Respect", registered in the Field Diary; (2) six semi-structured audio recorded individual interviews with teachers and administrators in charge of the project, about one hour each; and (3) a video recorded focus group session of 31 minutes with a class of 25 students of the 9th grade.

After the necessary authorization and approval of the study by the school administration and the University's Research Ethics Committee, the researcher made periodic visits to the school in order to (a) afford both participants and the researcher with opportunities to get familiarized with each other; and (b) to help the researcher to become familiar with the complexities of that specific school's context (Minayo, 2012). All participants' names and particular characteristics were changed to preserve their identities.

Most of the observed activities were directly linked to the school's 'Respect' project, since the study proposed the following activities: monthly pedagogical staff meetings regarding the project; events and lectures for the whole school, such as a Women's Day lecture, a celebration of indigenous culture event; and

classes led by teachers directly involved in the project, who were in charge of developing specific activities to discuss with students about issues related to prejudices. Informal conversations with educators about the project were also registered in the Field Diary. In total, 58 hours were dedicated to participant observations.

It is noteworthy that this school had a class called “Diversified Practice 2” as part of its curriculum, which afforded teachers the flexibility to work with topics complementary to those of the formal curriculum. The school project used this class to bring about, discuss and reflect on topics such as gender, race, and diversity, mainly by working with students on text interpretations and writing activities. Such classes were, therefore, preferably observed.

Following the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two administrators closely related to creating and developing the “Respect” project. Then, four teachers in charge of the classes mentioned previously (“Diversified Practice 2”) were interviewed. The audio-recorded interviews were a great opportunity to explore participants’ ideas, beliefs and perspectives related to the project, their perspectives on how it was implemented, the eventual differences they noticed (or not) before and after the project, and so on.

After the interviews, a focus group session was carried out with 25 students from one of the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade classes, where they could explore and express their perspectives about the project and the topics discussed as part of its proposal. Students participated voluntarily in the video-recorded session. Data resulted from reviewing all the information gathered and was constructed from an interpretive-constructive methodological approach. Specifically, information was derived from observations recorded in the Field Diary, integral transcription of audio recorded interviews, and video recording of the focus group session. After reviewing all data multiple times, important sections were selected regarding the study’s objectives to organize and guide the data analysis.

## Results

Results and discussion are presented according to three thematic axes: the professionals’ perspectives on the ‘Respect’ project, implementation of dialogical practices, and deconstruction of prejudices. They were elaborated from an integrative perspective, which considers the qualitatively intertwined nature of data construction, theoretical interpretations, and discussion, according to the theoretical and epistemological framework of this research (Valsiner & Branco, 2022). This is why they are presented together.

### Professionals’ perspectives on the *Respect* project

It was striking to note how the interviewed professionals (designated by fictitious names) were engaged and motivated to work with and develop the project. In their narratives, their work aimed to build a welcoming school environment for all, but especially for students. They wanted to see the school as a place where students felt safe and free to learn. Four of the interviewed participants spoke with sadness about the past years in that school, which was regarded by the community as one of the most violent in that district. Nevertheless, they were also proud to see the school changing, which they attributed to the implementation of the project.

Julia (teacher) explained that after the project, students showed much more care for the school environment. According to Cezar’s (teacher and school administrator) and Julia’s narratives, broken chairs and dirty classrooms, to name just a few problems, were often seen before the project started. At the time of the research, the school was clean with colorful painted walls. Murals displayed no signs of destruction, and collective materials were well preserved. In fact, the researcher verified this care during the entire observation period.

Another aspect Julia stressed was the change she saw in students' self-esteem. It is worth mentioning that this school's students were predominantly non-white children, and after the project, Julia said they seemed to accept themselves much more, particularly by displaying their non-white traits such as frizzy, curly hair. Concerning this issue, teacher Isa, who was new in the school during the research time, highlighted the respect with which she was treated by students regarding her own dark skin and curly hair, something unusual for her in other schools where she had worked before. This experience positively surprised her, to see how students seemed to become empowered by her presence, appreciating those racial markers as something beautiful, demonstrating pride because their teacher looked like them.

Isa was not only surprised about the acceptance of her aesthetic identity markers, she also mentioned that she was amazed by the vocabulary the school community used, such as the correct use of the term bullying. According to her, *"It is much easier for you to work on the social issue of bullying when (...) students already have access (...) to this dialogue about diversity. It is easier to respect the other when you know who the other is"*. For her, *"working with diversity makes conflict mediation a lot easier, too."* These are some of the examples that adult participants gave to highlight changes they saw in the school environment and in students, which they regarded as a result of the project.

However, some topics still seem to remain a challenge to teachers. For example, Katia commented that, in one instance, she noticed a student was behaving differently, and when she approached her to ask what was happening, the student felt safe enough to say to the teacher that she had been sexually abused for many years. Katia, then, said in the interview *"I got scared because there are situations that are so... heavy (...) There are students with such a painful reality (pause). It is pretty hard..."* Then she continued,

*The difficulty for me is exactly to deal with personal problems, like I told you, sometimes you open a window, and you cannot close it. You have to be very sensitive in order to (...) succeed... you can't solve it, they are not your problems, you don't have the ability to solve them, you know? You call on the administration, (...) you try to refer it to other instances, but... this is the difficulty, knowing how far you can go, to try and help.*

Katia expressed a common feeling felt by teachers now-a-days: there is apprehension, or even fear, over discussing the issue of diversity in schools, especially sexual and gender diversity. This fear is usually related to the supposed threat to the social order, which encourages teachers to better control their students by avoiding subjects that may "cause a fuss" or provoke dissent (Madureira et al., 2018; Miskolci, 2007). Although diversity and inclusion are seen as positive subjects in people's discourses, in practice, the topics are often considered as threatening, generating a kind of moral panic (Coehn, 2011) among educators. This is particularly true regarding topics such as gender and sexuality. Currently, in Brazil, there is a movement called *"School Without Party"* (*"Escola Sem Partido"* in Portuguese) that, among other things, warns about the risks and dangers of children and teenagers being "indoctrinated" or "oriented" by their teachers to willfully transgress culturally pre-established precepts concerning gender and sexuality. According to this movement, students become confused and insecure about their sexual and gender identities and may easily transgress "moral" traditions simply by discussing these issues with their teachers.

Research has shown, though, that what actually leaves kids confused and unprotected is the lack of access to knowledge, and the absence of safe places to discuss and have open dialogues about such issues, so that knowledge about them can be reconstructed, and individuals can make sense of themselves (Madureira et al., 2018). By trying to preserve young people's innocence, schools leave them in ignorance, therefore vulnerable to harmful and abusive experiences. Ignorance, not innocence (Louro, 1997), is the result of avoiding subjects that are important to support young people's self-development. To this point, for Cezar, the project's main objective is not to encourage or influence kids to transgress cultural norms while working with themes such as gender, sexual and racial diversities. The goal is simply, and ultimately, to emphasize the importance of respect and dialogue among people, as we further discuss. Simone (teacher) summarizes the objective of the project, as she sees it, compellingly:

*These kids' lives are important and must be cared for. [Because these are issues] of a population that is excluded (...) [and] that needs this work done (...) as a public school's project [in a broader sense]. Because I think that the public school that (...) ignores these issues owes a lot to society and to this city.*

According to the interviewed professionals, providing safe spaces to discuss these taboo issues in the school context was not an attempt to “indoctrinate” students, make them comply or change their minds, but rather to allow them to reflect upon the topics, and autonomously evaluate different perspectives on issues related to beliefs, values, and prejudices in general. After all, our society is home to diverse worldviews, beliefs, values, and experiences; in other words, we live in a heterogeneous cultural context. To build a way of successfully living together in a democratic society entails, from our perspective, opening—instead of avoiding—the construction of social spaces to invite and promote the occurrence of dialogical practices, or true dialogues (Duberman, 2021; Paula & Branco, 2022). Dialogical practices do not strive to arrive at everyone’s agreement but seek to generate dialogues that recognize our differences and shared humanity. Without this, we lose sight of the limits of democracy—and violence, exclusion and injustice become acceptable and naturalized. The promotion of dialogue(s) was, according to participants, the goal of the “*Respect*” project, which was positively evaluated by them. It is worth mentioning, though, that such positive evaluation comes from the adult participants, for we did not focus, in our study, upon an extensive evaluation of the project. Our goal, besides listening to teachers and a group of students, was primarily to investigate what happened in the context of specific activities created by the project—like the 58 hours of observations of four classes of Diversified Practice 2.

In fact, researcher’s observations did not reveal relevant instances of intentional authoritarianism enacted by teachers, and students in the focus group tended to agree that the project favored their participation in sensitive topics discussions. However, some findings may help us to theoretically elaborate on the issue of how difficult it is to engage in true dialogical practices, even when the intention to foster prejudice deconstruction is there.

## Discussion

### Implementation of dialogical practices

During the field research, something that stood out was how often professionals verbally expressed that they deeply valued dialogue as an essential pedagogical practice related to the project. Aware of how sensitive issues might trigger either painful or relief experiences for students, teachers stressed that practicing dialogue was the best way to empower students through knowledge and reflection. However, there were some indications, found in both observations and their narratives, that the concept of dialogue was sometimes understood as turn-taking conversations, instead of ontological dialogues (Matusov, 2009), in which all participants actually contribute to meaning co-constructions.

As Madureira et al. (2021) assert, when students trust that adults would really listen to what they have to say, educators would be surprised at how intensively students are ready and willing to critically reflect on matters that touch their lives. Dialogue can build bridges between school contents/experiences and other significant social contexts in which students participate. It was noteworthy how Isa, Simone, and Pedro (teachers), for example, developed trusting relationships with their students. Students seemed to be comfortable asking questions in their classes, bringing out issues that markedly enriched the discussions. As one student put it during the focus group, “*we discuss topics that we do not want to discuss, sometimes they are sad or heavy, but we end up willing to discuss because [teacher] starts talking, and it becomes interesting!*”.

Isa stated that “*I also put myself as an apprentice in situations of dialogue*”, which indicates how willing and open she was to learn from her students, not positioning herself as the authority who knows everything. This

is a subtle, yet strong, belief in educational contexts concerning the role of teachers: they would have all the knowledge to be transmitted to students, who should learn from teachers by being obedient and reproducing what they say (Meijers & Hermans, 2018). Freire (1996, 2013), among other authors, consistently criticized this misleading logic in education. He called it “banking education”, for it assumes the teacher to be the only expert in class, the only one who knows about the topics, therefore, the only one in condition to “transfer” his or her knowledge to students.

Freire (1996) emphasizes the difference between teacher’s authority and teacher’s authoritarianism. The former is relevant to the teacher’s role, the leader who sets the goals and limits activities by dialogues, directing the promotion of autonomy among students. The latter, the authoritarian teacher, is defined by taking a rigid controlling role anchored in the belief that students are ignorant, demanding their obedience and ability to reproduce the knowledge transmitted. In other words, authoritarianism feeds on monological practices, based on unilateral knowledge transmission, while teachers with authority promote ontological dialogues (Matusov, 2009), in which everyone can participate as they engage in active learning experiences.

It is well established that the developing subject is active and constructive (Piaget, 1987); therefore, it is incredibly reductionist to conceive the role of teachers as being knowledge transmitters. Students should be recognized as subjects, active human beings in their learning process (Gomes et al., 2018), and the predominant monological practices in schools (Matusov, 2009), grossly misled, cannot foster processes conducive to high quality deep learning, autonomy, and creativity.

The difficulty in overcoming monological practices, though, lies in strong historical beliefs empowered by affective certainties, convictions, and values traditionally related to concepts of teaching and learning. As Valsiner (2014) points out, when such convictions derive from hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields (values), they are not easy to transform and produce actual changes in the dynamics of the classroom. They simply guide and direct teachers’ actions, not necessarily intentionally or consciously, because often teachers are not aware that their practices are rooted in such old, traditional, deeply hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields or values (Valsiner, 2014).

So, even in the motivated group of educators investigated, considerable difficulties were found concerning their engagement in dialogical practices. Some teachers, for instance, were not aware of their problems in overcoming monological and traditional structures of teacher-student interactions (Linell, 2009). In some of the observed activities, for example, educators did not give actual opportunities for students to express themselves or freely participate in discussions. Some teachers tried to entertain a genuine intention to stimulate students’ participation, asking open questions at certain times and, apparently, waiting for students’ contributions. However, when they phrased their questions, or reacted to students’ participation, their words had an opposite effect: instead of encouraging students to speak out their opinions and engage in the discussion, teachers inhibited their speech.

The following example illustrates the finding above. On one occasion, in the context of an activity inspired by the project, Cezar, a teacher very committed to the project, asked students about their reactions to watching a movie that, among other things, addressed the topic of an affective relationship between two young men. The movie discussed issues of race and sexual identities. When one female student said, “I was scared...”, the teacher immediately exclaimed with doubt and surprise, “*Scared!?*”. His posture, facial expression and tone of voice clearly indicated his serious disapproval of the student’s confession. That was the end of her participation, and she did not say anything else. After that, other students barely participated since the teacher made clear, even if not intentionally, that he was not open to listening to their true feelings and ideas concerning the movie.

In sum, to hold clear expectations of what the “right answers” are supposed to be, mischaracterizes the very dialogical process that should be encouraged at that moment. Inhibiting or disapproving positions seen as prejudiced, especially by nonverbal actions, allows for neither dialogue nor active reflections by students, for it restrains their active, authentic participation (Linell, 2009). In the next section, we explain why teachers’



awareness regarding their own interventions is fundamentally important to prejudices' deconstruction. To do so, as intended by the school project, it is necessary to provide students with experiences that engage them in true dialogues and discussions, where everyone's positionings are listened to, safely accepted, and taken as a legitimate expression of one's point of view (Paula & Branco, 2022).

## Deconstruction of prejudices

An important assumption of the present study, invigorated by the interviewed educators, is that efforts in the direction of building peaceful and democratic school environments—contexts where people feel that diversity is, indeed, welcome—demand the engagement of students in dialogical discussions about ethical and sensitive topics. To achieve this goal, the enactment of dialogical practices is absolutely necessary (Paula & Branco, 2022). It is expected and understandable that relevant social values such as justice, equality and respect are mobilized during discussions on these topics. The various perspectives and meanings concerning human values need to emerge and be discussed because, most likely, they mean different things to different people, affecting each person in different ways (Matusov, 2009). That is why an intrinsic challenge to dialogical practices happens when teachers become shocked, moved, or surprised—affectively mobilized—by students' pro-prejudice perspectives and ideas, in their classrooms.

It is not easy for teachers to listen to potentially prejudiced speeches that might emerge as students express their minds on specific subjects, typically impregnated with traditional cultural values, taboos, or prejudices. In these situations teachers, almost automatically, tend to respond by clinging to certain expectations regarding students' answers, hoping that they would not be so bluntly intolerant, expressing ideas such as *"If a woman is beaten by her husband and doesn't leave him, she deserves it"*, or, *"I'm ok that gays exist but not anywhere near me, I wouldn't be friends with a gay dude."* These were some phrases students voiced during class observations in this study. At first, to hear something like this—opposite to teachers' expectations—may be very difficult, and adults' initial reactions generally try to silence the students' prejudiced positioning by using their authority to impose the "correct" answer or idea. Values and prejudices, though, are hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields (Valsiner, 2014) that do not change just because someone disapproves of them or tries to impose their own perspective—either by reasoning or punishment—on the other. The question is, therefore, how values and prejudices may become subject to change, that is, how can educators promote students' development towards embracing diversity?

We previously mentioned Valsiner's model for the affective-semiotic regulation of the Self (2014, 2021). According to this model, the highest hierarchical level, level 4, consists of the domain where values and prejudices are forged and exert their regulatory role. Values and prejudices consist of hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields deeply rooted in the individual's Self, and they cannot easily be transformed by social messages just grounded in informational content. The point is, values and prejudices strongly guide the psyche, namely, one's perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions. To mobilize and transform values and prejudices, therefore, demands going through significant affective experiences—mostly involving the mediation of reflective thinking and internal dialogues (Hermans, 2018). These experiences, then, activate the dialogical self-system to eventually transform old values and prejudices into new hypergeneralized affective-semiotic fields, rearranging their hierarchical order in the person's Self (Branco, Freire & Roncancio-Moreno, 2020). This explains why informative lectures or campaigns cannot deconstruct prejudices. It is paramount to actively engage people—teachers and students, within school contexts—in participating in highly affective, meaningful experiences related to possible deconstructions.

Values and prejudices are learned and developed ontogenetically throughout a whole life of experiences in the family, neighborhood, etc., together with years of schooling and other social interactions. In teachers' cases, it usually is a long life, including the time devoted to university training and long years of schooling experience (Matusov, 2021). There is plenty of time to internalize broader social values, but also values related

to schoolwork and relations. Often, we do not easily reconcile our actions with what we say we value, and there may be a significant gap between the two. For some teachers in the study, it was striking to note how they attributed value to the idea of dialogue, yet often they fell prey to monological practices without realizing it. To recognize this lack of awareness is not to suggest that this results from intentional or conscious processes; quite the opposite, it shows how powerful values are in guiding human actions, frequently without the person realizing what or why that is happening (Branco, 2018; Valsiner, 2021).

The possibility of deconstructing affectively rooted values and prejudices, which constitute the grounds for the configurations of the individual's dialogical self, necessarily encompasses people's engagement in ontological dialogic practices (Matusov, 2009). Such engagement may open important pathways for people to welcome diversity and different perspectives on relevant matters. This paves the way to creativity, inclusion and democratic attitudes toward diverse opinions, tensions, and even contradictions able to generate new perspectives and human development (Branco, 2018; Valsiner, 2014). It is *not* through unilateral lectures that prejudices can be analyzed and deconstructed. In other words, monological practices do not facilitate the achievement of this goal, because we are dealing with deeply grounded affect-laden issues.

The present study, therefore, strongly suggests that embracing dialogical practices in school contexts not only represents the best venue for successful education in general but is especially relevant for reflecting on affectively rooted topics such as gender, race, and diversity. As Matusov (2009) puts it, "High-level reflection and learning is dialogic by its nature. Dialogue humanizes our actions and deeds. It occurs only among consciousnesses that have equal rights. There is no alternative to dialogue for genuine human education." (p. 80).

Creating opportunities for truly dialogic exchanges to occur is a fruitful way to deconstruct prejudices. It is through reflection and dialogue that the deepest affects can be mobilized and thus transformed. Unlike monological practices, in dialogue, there is the possibility of shaking not only individual ideas and values, but also questioning the power structures of our society (Matusov, 2020). This is why dialogical practices can be so threatening and so potent at the same time, because, after all, such practices leave us exposed to uncertainties, transformation, and change. As oppression and domination are fertile grounds for fear and authoritarian action, ontological dialogic practices (Matusov, 2009) and values consist of the best way to co-construct a truly democratic society.

In defending the adoption of dialogic practices here, it would be tempting to offer simple suggestions to be applied to avoid the fear and discomfort that might emerge in this endeavor. However, this is not an easy task. Mobilizing deep-rooted affects related to the topics addressed in the present study might, indeed, generate eventual discomforts among teachers and students. However, acknowledging these difficulties is an important step toward emphasizing how teachers and their students need institutional support to talk about their values, fears, anxieties, and challenges, as well as their experiences of success. This would help and support them to develop and sustain dialogical practices. Considering the example of the school and professionals who participated in the study, and considering their difficulties and challenges, it is possible to envision possibilities for the future of school practices.

Dialogue between teachers, other education professionals, students and the school community can contribute to the co-construction of new values, new practices, and meanings about being a teacher, being a student, the role of schools, and the objectives of education. Mutual collaboration and shared meanings can be a good start for building more effective strategies aligned with the expectations and goals of the school community. In summary, psychology and education can work together, contributing to the accomplishment of educational goals that encourage creativity, prepare students for their future, and deconstruct social prejudices that cause so much pain. This, for sure, would be the best way to promote and develop democratic and peaceful societies.

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## Notes

- 1 Both authors had equal participation in the writing of this article: in the conception and design, analysis and interpretation of data and in the discussion of the results.

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